



*Suds &  
sawm*

**A Pine Time for  
Murder**

**STELLA MARIE ALDEN**

**A Pine Time for Murder**

**A**

**Suds & Sam Mystery**

**By Stella Marie Alden**

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## Author's Note

Dear Readers,

I had so much fun writing this new Suds and Sam mystery. The couple has become near and dear to my heart. Suds' layback approach coupled with Samantha's New York City snark keeps me up all night giggling. When I write, they dictate the story, and I am merely the transcriber.

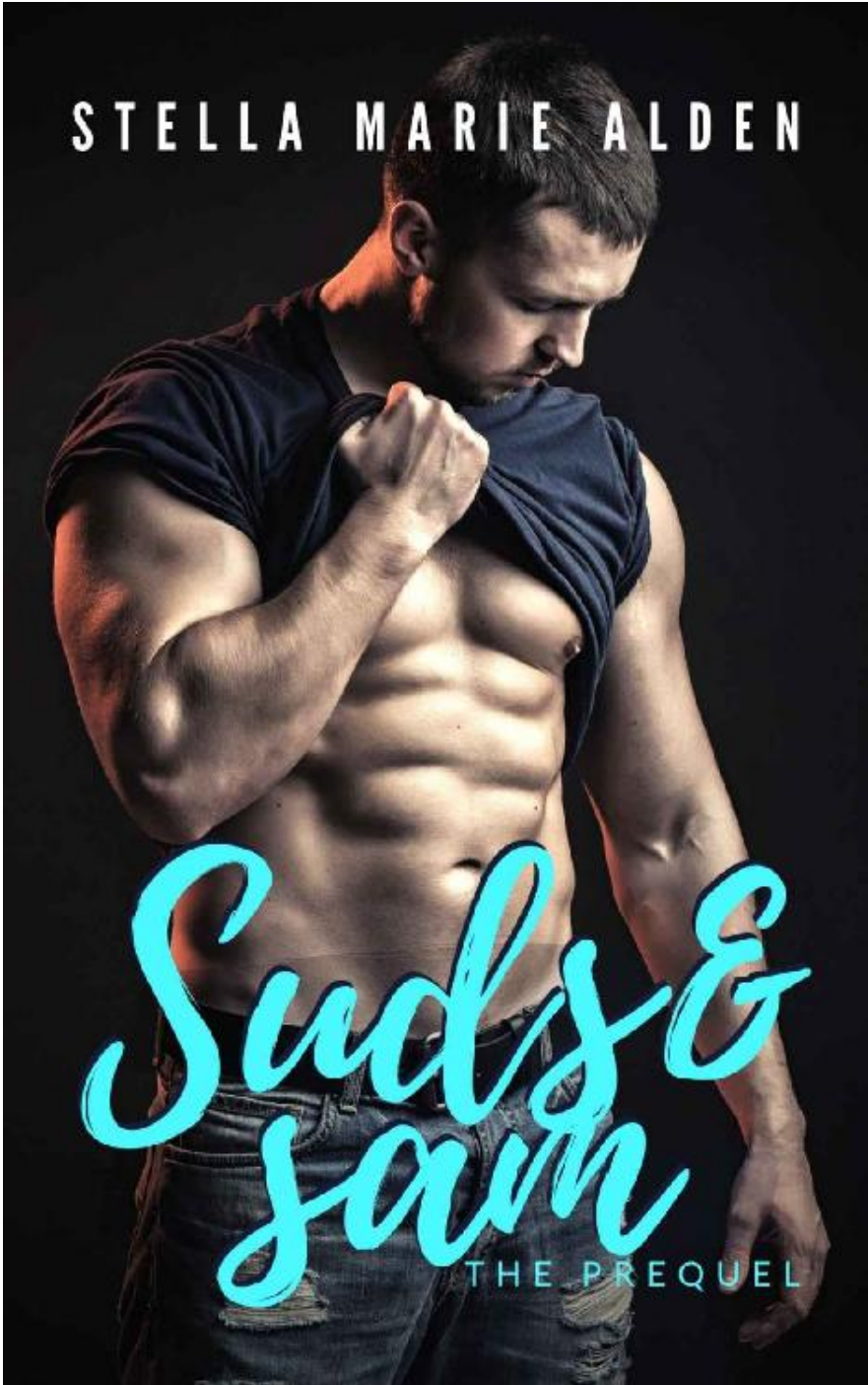
Thanks for downloading my book. Expect sexy moments, laugh out loud moments, and a stay up all-night mystery.

If you've never read a Suds and Sam, the first one is always free.

Much Love,

Stella

STELLA MARIE ALDEN



*Suds & Sam*  
THE PREQUEL

# A Free Gift for You!

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FIRST IN *Suds and Sam* SERIES

I've never met anyone less suited to work at Patten Securities and yet give her my whole-hearted recommendation. How else can I keep her safe? The woman is a walking, talking, danger magnet.

“So, you’re thinking a little revenge sex?”

“More like manna in the desert.”

“How long has it been?”

“Over six months.”

“Ouch. Were you trying for sainthood?”

“Apparently.”

“Give me five, I’ll come get you. Wait inside your building, I’ll flash the lights.”

“Don’t you want my address?”

“Sugar, I knew almost everything about you the minute I logged into my laptop.”

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# Prologue

Suds

Standing by my client, Kenneth, I lift my head and peruse the Capitol grounds in front of the new fencing.

When I'm certain there's no threat to the hundred or so Gen Zers, I lower my chin and speak into the mic taped to my chest. "Hands? You there? Can you explain why anyone would want to have an anti-gun rally in December? The legislative branch has all left for winter break."

My friend, manning the desk at headquarters in Manhattan, chuckles in my earpiece. "Stop bitching, Sebastian. It's easy bucks and you'll be home for the weekend. What's not to love?"

"I don't know. I got a bad feelin'." A former SEAL, I'd learned to respect my spidey senses and right now, they're tingling like mad. "Can you see anything?"

"Other than a bunch of teens and college kids exercising their first amendment rights? No." My pal flies the Patten Securities' surveillance drone lower which increases the volume of the engine's buzz.

As the sound disappears under the crowd's chanting, I shout to be heard above the ruckus. "Damn. I wish they'd protest in Texas or Florida. I'm freezing my ass off."

*Apparently, the DC weather didn't get the memo about global warming.* I step closer to my eighteen-year-old client, a mass shooting survivor whose mom is paying my bodyguard bill. She's a real nice lady and her family has gone through so much pain, I'll be damned should anyone hurt her son.

Suddenly, a flurry of motion in the distance catches my attention. "What's goin' on at the Lincoln Memorial?"

My cousin-in-law curses. "Heavily armed militia heading your way."



“Fuck.” Swiveling my charge by the shoulder, I snatch his e-megaphone. “Y’all need to run for cover. Now.”

“Hell no! We’re not going anywhere.” The kid pushes at my chest and the wasted seconds may be his last because a dozen angry men raise their automatic weapons.

I pray to see another sunset, grab my pistol, and speak into my comm. “Call for backup. We’re in a heap of trouble.”

“On it. Hang tight. I got your back, bro.” The former operative’s calm voice helps ground me as a six-foot middle-aged man shoves a skinny girl to the pavement.

“Y’all need to go. These kids ain’t doin’ you no harm. Leave them be.” Pushing the bully aside, I help the teen to stand, and pull her behind me next to Ken.

While I do this, another member of this brave militia stomps his big black army boots toward me. A knife scar across his right cheek appears in high relief against his red face. He wears a denim jacket covered in badges, including a swastika.

The Nazi shoves his fist in my face, making sure I see the prison tats covering his knuckles. “Who the hell are you?”

*An ex-Navy Seal who fought for our freedom, asshole.* I’d take him down but I’m afraid some of the kids might get hurt.

I wave my arm to encompass the protesters. “Them boys’ balls ain’t even dropped. And the girls are still calling their mommas at night. How about we let them be and I buy you and your buddies a case of beer?”

When the moron steps closer, I pull my gun from under my black leather jacket and point it at his head. “You need to go.”

“Make me.” Jutting out his chin, he smiles, not at all worried about the approaching sirens, almost upon us.

“DC police are five minutes out. Ramble like your life depends on it.” As Hands sounds in my ear, the two officers tasked with handling the small crowd wave their service revolvers from side to side.

Their pea shooters are no match for automatic weapons. The ex-con lifts his at the kids. Holy shit. If he fires, dozens are going to get maimed or killed. I have no idea if his buddies plan to join him in a shooting frenzy, but I'm a-gonna count on the grace of God he's a lone nutcase and his friends aren't in on his craziness.

He's got a good grip on his weapon. The safety is off, and his brown eyes are completely emotionless. I seen that look in Afghanistan. A woman stepped in front of our jeep. We thought she held a baby in her arms, but the bundle of blankets turned out to be a bomb. Our driver stopped so as not to run her over and the fucking bitch blew my brothers to kingdom come.

Hands' voice brings me back from my stroll down memory lane. "You still with me, Suds?"

"Yup." As my weapon points at my target's head, I keep one eye glued to the dangerous nutcase's trigger finger and my other on his face. "I'm only gonna ask you once. Drop it now."

His face twitches.

*Shit. I don't think I can talk him down.* "Sir, you don't want to do this."

He swallows hard, and as his hand moves, I take him out and quickly point my gun at the next of his buddies aiming for me. Two shots fire and a burning sensation rips into my upper arm.

*Fuck. I'm hit.* "Everyone down!" While blood oozes out my wound, I jump down and cover my client's body.

When the shooting stops, I lift my head. The motherfucker who shot me stares at his weapon, confused. Hell, I'm sorry, but he should've thought this over. I can't risk him killing anyone. Moving my pistol to my left hand, I shoot at his armored chest, and he goes down.

"DCPD. Drop your weapons. We have all your ID's with facial recognition. You're all accessories to attempted murder." My pal's voice sounds through the megaphone's Bluetooth.

As the drone flies over the tops of their heads, the wannabe commandos come to their senses. Eyes wide, mouths open, they lift their arms in the air. Thank God, murdering a bunch of high school kids was not on their agenda.

Holding my arm so it doesn't gush more, I roll off my client. "You hurt?"

"No. I'm fine." He helps the girl next to him to stand and they trail behind me as I work with the two local cops to disarm the terrorists.

Hands sounds in my ear. "How bad is it?"

"Through and through, but it may have hit a major pipe. I'm bleedin' like a stuck pig."

While I grip my bicep, Ken shakes his head. "This is exactly why we're protesting."

"Wahl, y'all need to get busy. Have everyone post this shit on social media. Soon, reporters will be shoving microphones under your noses. Spread your message. Rally your troops. It ain't what happens to you, it's how you respond to it." Done with my speech, I grasp his shoulder to keep from falling.

"Maybe you should sit." The thin female points to the hole in my favorite jacket.

In my ear, my brother back at HQ sucks in his breath. "Do as she says."

Putting more pressure on the wound, I shoot her a wink and a smile. "I've had much worse. Believe me, it's jes' a scratch."

Afore long, more members of the Capitol police show up along with some Feds, ambulances, and the metro PD. Helicopters whap-whap overhead and the place swarms with reporters.

By the time my cell phone rings, I'm sitting on the paramedic's tailgate. "Hey sugar."

"Do not sugar me. Look up and wave."

After I do as my wife says, she sighs. “Hands tells me you were shot.”

“Yes ma’am.” I put her on mute and dip my head into my chest. “Seriously, pal? You ratted me out?”

“Not me. She saw it on the news.” While he pleads his innocence in one of my ears, my gal insists on talking in my other.

“Suds? You there? Are you hurt bad?”

“The bullet jes’ nicked me darlin’.” The dizziness in my brain probably indicates the wound is a little more serious, but I see no point in mentioning that to her right now.

“Was anyone else injured?”

I hate how worried she sounds and try to make light of the whole thing. “Well, the guy who shot me took a hit to the vest. And the one with the AK? I’m afraid he’s dancin’ with the devil... Hold on. I see the DC police. They’re gonna want a statement.”

No doubt catching the pure glee in my tone, my wife groans. “Suds. Do. Not. Ramble.”

“I won’t honey. I swear. It may take me a while to get out all the facts, though. A man needs to be thorough. Gotta go. Talk soon. Love ya, babe.” Chuckling, I swipe the red icon and wave over the closest officer.

It takes a bit of finagling to retrieve my wallet with my left hand. Eventually, I get it out and hand it over.

The cop’s dark eyes study my face. “It says here you’re a private eye.”

Eager to confess, I nod enthusiastically. “Yes sir. My gun permit is in there, too. I was on the job, working for Patten Securities. Their card is right behind my Visa, under the picture of my wife and son.”

“Cute kid.” A small smile breaks his stern countenance and I take that as a sign to keep talking.

“Smart as a whip. Jes’ turned four. Could you wave up at the helicopter? My spouse gets a bit worried if’n I get shot. You married?”

The guy shakes his head, no.

“Well, when you find the one, never let her go, even if she’s a full-fledged danger magnet. My Samantha and me? We’ve talked about it some and-”

“Leave.” A uniformed man with captain’s bars dismisses my audience. *Damn. I was just getting started.*

The pretty paramedic tightens my tourniquet, pushes my head to the gurney, and speaks to the sergeant. “He’s lost a lot of blood. You’ll need to talk to him on the way to the hospital.”

“Wait. See that kid?” I point at the blond teenager speaking to reporters and a bunch of folks holding forth their cameras. “I’m his bodyguard. I can’t leave him until my backup arrives.”

The guy in charge regards my arm. “You took a bullet for him?”

“Yeah. I’d love to come down to the station and give my statement.”

At my kind offer, the ambulance attendant scowls. “No way. We’re leaving for the ER in two.”

My inquisitor jumps in beside me, and as the back door slams shut, his eyes narrow. “You’re Sebastian Sutcliff, right?”

“Yes sir. That would be me. And you are?”

“Sergeant Black.” He types on his phone and shakes his head. “It says here, you won the Guinness World Record for Rambling.”

“Indeed, I did.” My chest puffs out.

However, my grin fades as he frowns and scratches his head. “I promised my wife I’d take her to a Christmas party. I think it best if I take your statement now.”

The engine starts up, the young woman puts an IV in my arm, and through the haze, I realize we're about to leave. "Hold your horses. I can't go while Kenny's unguarded."

I bolt upright and try to get free but Black presses me down. "I've got a man on him until your company sends a replacement."

"That's mighty kind of you." My head falls back on the pillow and his large nose comes too close as he leans over me.

"Don't mention it. In return, you will tell me in as few words as possible what happened."

"Ah, damn. You take all the fun out of getting shot. I ain't promisin' I can do it, though. Ramblin' is a powerful hard habit to break and I-

"Mr. Sutcliff. For my marriage. I'm begging you to try."

"Yes sir. Bein' a happily wedded man myself, I fully understand. I was hired to guard Kenneth. He was all over the news. He's a survivor of the high school mass shooting last month in Oklahoma. The one where them ten kids got killed? You remember? Anyhow, he has become the spokesperson for the anti-gun lobby and has been getting death threats, so his parents called up Grayson Patten and asked for a personal bodyguard, but most of our guys was busy so Slate, my friend who runs the office, gave me a call on account of I told him my PI business was a little slow and it's almost Christmas and we could use a little extra flow of cash and"

Our vehicle takes a sharp turn, and the man has to hold on to stay upright. "Mr. Sutcliff. If you can, please remain on topic."

"Well, a group of militia men approached our demonstration. One pulled out an automatic weapon and I demanded he set it down. When he aimed at my head and moved his trigger finger, I fired first. Then, one of his nervous buddies shot me. I returned the favor, but to his body armor. He's lucky it's the holidays and I was feelin' the season."

"You admit to killing someone?"

“Sure do. Want to go down to the station and discuss it some more?” Hoping I can work on my award-winning time, I hold my breath.

“No. God, no. I assume you had surveillance?” Black’s good but I’m certain I can convince him to bring me to the precinct. Once I’ve got a foot in the door, there’s no stopping me.

“Yes sir. Hands. That’s what we call Gabe Hand in our New York Office. Great guy. Married my wife’s cousin, Mia. We called her a saint but come to find out-”

“Stop. Ask your man to send me the footage.”

“Ask him yourself.” I tug at my jacket zipper, expose my mic, and try not to sound miffed. “Seems to me you’d want to hear all the details.”

My world gets a little woozy. “Hey pal, you still there?”

My eyes droop and the man grins. “Nighty-night, Mr. Sutcliff. We’ll talk tomorrow in the hospital.”

“Wait, wait. Please.” Shit. The ambulance interior gets a mite fuzzy and fades away.

*So much for breaking my Guinness rambling record.  
Maybe next time.*

# Chapter 1

Sam

“It’s only been a week since you were shot. We don’t need the money, tough guy. Chill.” Standing at the kitchen sink, I turn toward his strong, warm body.

My shirtless husband walks behind me, slips his arms around my waist, and presses his arousal to my butt cheeks. “I’m not going to meet with Slate until Monday, which leaves plenty of time for recovery-sex. How about you and me go back to bed?”

“Mikey’s awake and we just made love... twice.” I kiss his soft lips and my panties dampen. At this rate, I’ll need to do laundry ASAP.

“Third time’s the charm.” He chuckles.

Nibbling his ear, my fingers squeeze his firm, sexy, ass. “Go feed your son and see if you can coax his coat off. I mistakenly mentioned looking for a Christmas tree and now, he’s raring to go.”

From the top floor of our old apartment building, I glance out the back door, check the time, and sigh. *It’s too early to call the plumber.*

“Maybe, we can move back to our house today?” My stomach churning, I grab a saltine, open the refrigerator door, and hide my head inside.

The nausea comes and goes but it’s lasted more than a couple days. Could I be pregnant? I remember the few missed pills and my heart thumps. Suds and I have talked about a second child but at no time did we agree we were prepared.

*Shit. What if he’s not? I don’t want him killing himself to provide for another. He already does too much.*



While I swallow back bile, my husband lifts our tyke into his booster seat.

When scrambled eggs are placed in front of him, our preschooler pushes his breakfast away and scowls. “I’m a big boy, Daddy.”

“Sorry champ. I plumb forgot.” He dumps the food in a glass bowl, sets it down, and keeps his one usable hand nearby in case the dish should slide off.

“You spoil him rotten.” Smiling, I crack an egg in the blender, add honey, vanilla yogurt, and milk.

As I mix my smoothie, my husband spoons his portion from the frying pan onto his plate and sits. Long lashes lift, his smoldering eyes stare at mine, and my breath hitches.

*Holy shit, how does this man still cause me to cream with just a look?* Reaching across the table, I smooth a lock of dark hair, and as it drops carelessly over a brow, his lips quirk up in an easy smile.

My clit twitches and I mentally count the hours until we can find alone time. “I love you, tough guy.”

“Love you, too, sugar. I’ll love you even more if you convince the plumber to fix our bathroom so we can move back home. Are you sure we can’t tolerate the odor?”

“You can judge for yourself, later. To me, it ranks about a twelve on the disgust-o-meter.”

“It can’t smell worse than one of Mikey’s poopy diapers and we survived lots of those.” Clueless, he smirks over his coffee mug while I shake my head back and forth.

“Believe me, it is. Salvatore said something about a vent, a trap, and code violations.”

“They say those things to make you pay more. How about you and I get dressed, grab Mikey, and go find us a tree? Then, we take a deep sniff and see if we can move back home.”

Suds’ mini-me, grins and claps his hands. As he pushes his chair away from the table, the cereal topples. Cringing, I wait for the crash, but the ex-SEAL catches it mid-fall with his left

hand and places it in the sink. Then, he grabs his son by the waist, tosses him in the air, and sets him on his feet.

While they find their coats, Catrina jumps on the counter, stretches her head under the faucet, and licks the bowl clean.

“No.” As I’m pushing the cat off the shelf, Joey shouts up from the ground floor.

“Yo, Sammy. Frankie’s here.” Why he can’t text me like a normal human being is a mystery I’ll never solve.

Shit. The hitman must need my babysitting services.

In retribution, I holler out the back. “Send him up this way.”

My annoying cousin pops his head out his kitchen window and twists his neck. “I can’t. Da garbage bin is in the way.”

*Fine.* I pull on the rope, the trap door opens, and I lean over the hole. “Rose? Mia? If you’re not decent, stay in your rooms. Frankie’s on his way up.”

Rose stomps her feet and bangs her bedroom door shut. “Jesus, Mary, and Joseph. Why not use the back entrance?”

I shout back, “I dunno. Ask Joey.”

While I peer down, Frankie adjusts his soft pet carrier, pops his head up over the railing, and traverses the second-floor’s kitchen.

Halfway up our attic steps, he hands over Chloe. “T’anks. I’ll come get her in a day or so.”

“Sure. Nice seeing you. Um, good luck.” *Awkward.*

Chuckling, he waves as he disappears back down the stairs. After the bottom door slams shut, I let the cat out of the bag, so to speak. The yellow look-alike cousin of my feline hisses and hides under the couch.

“C’mon, sweetheart. Be nice. Your Dad will off someone and be back before you know it.”

Rose, in flannel PJ’s with hearts on them, pushes her door until it hits the lowered steps. “Jesus, it’s like Grand Central

Station in here.”

Mia, her sister, shouts from the other bedroom. “Do not use the Lord’s name in vain.”

“In vain means without success or result, which is not the case. I am praying to get some more goddamn sleep.”

“Sorry, youz guyz.” I shrug. “I had no idea he was coming.”

I raise my volume so my male cousin, listening two flights below, can hear. “Knucklehead blocked the pathway again.”

His muffled voice responds from below. “Here a few days and already you’re bitchin’.”

“God, Joey. You are so annoying.” For the benefit of my cousins, I stick out my tongue.

Rose giggles and squeezes around the stairs to her coffee maker and pours. “It’s like old times.”

Running down, I squeeze her tight. “I’m so glad you two decided to keep me company.”

“Well, now that your bodyguard is home, you don’t need us, right?”

“But Hands and Wheels left again. Why not stay until they finish their assignments. Where are they, anyways?”

Mia, her dark hair half out of a ponytail, slaps her bunny slippers across the floor and helps herself to caffeine. “They’re not telling us, so it must be awful.”

I hug her. “Slate won’t allow anything bad to happen. Don’t worry. I’ll see if I can wrangle more information out of Suds.”

My spouse calls down the stairs. “I will exchange sexual favors for intel. Come get dressed, your son is rarin’ to go.”

Halfway up the steps, I stop to explain. “Joey says some trees fell off a truck down the block and they’re going fast.”

Mia gives me a disapproving glance. “You’re going to buy a stolen Christmas tree? Anyone else see the irony?”

“Hey. No one knows for sure and we’re not going to ask. Do you know what the spruces at Danny’s are going for? Holy Christ... mas.”

Rose glances at her phone. “Well, dress warm. This wind chill makes it feel like twenty degrees.”

“Thanks for the heads up. Talk later.” I run up the stairs and meet my husband coming down.

“Cats are fighting. I put one in our bedroom.” His solution is short term. We only have the one kitty litter box. *Damn. They’re usually so good together.*

“Mia, would you be a saint and bring Catrina back to our house? She’ll be happier there. Pretty please? I’ll make it up to you, I promise.” At my not-so-subtle attempt to flutter my lashes, Mia sighs and nods.

“Sure.”

With that settled, Suds grabs the back of my head and kisses my breath away. “We’ll be waiting outside for you.”

In my bedroom, I dig through the suitcase and find black jeans. For fun, I duck into a matching long-sleeved cotton shirt with the words Danger Magnet written on the front.

Contemplating whether I need my gun, I decide to leave it in the safe and when finished dressing, dash down the stairs.

At the bottom, Joey looks up from his phone. “Let me know if they’re any good. My kid wants one, too.”

I wave at his second grader. “Hey Kimmy.”

Dressed for school in her St. Thomas’ plaid jumper, she jumps up and down. “Hiya Aunt Sammy. Don’t take the best. Daddy promised that one to me.”

“No worries, Kimmy. It’s all yours.” Outside, I sigh as we take to the sidewalk. “Are you sure you can carry a tree with one wing?”

He gives me a lopsided grin. “Sugar, if I can’t, it might be time to put me in the ground.”

We stroll along the blocks of similar three-story homes divided by a foot of land, then turn onto the main drag.

When the wind whips past a brick building, I shiver. “I hope the trees are still there, otherwise, we’re taking a drive to Jersey.”

“I can keep you warm, babe.” Suds puts his arm around me.

“Out here?” Laughing, I pull him toward Mrs. Murphy’s bakery where we grab cookies for later and some hot joe to go.

The fragrant smell, which I usually love, brings up bile. The last time it happened, I was preggo with Mikey.

As I tear off the coffee lid and add cream, I broach the subject of a second child. “If you decide to stay home for a few weeks, maybe we could, you know... practice what we talked about?”

The adept dad slips a harness around our non-stop kid, sets him on his feet, and he takes off. Walking to where our tethered son jumps up and down at the corner, Suds lifts one brow.

“Sorry sugar, not following you.”

“You know... try for a girl?” I bite my lower lip and am pleasantly surprised when a smile brightens his whole face.

“I do love tryin’.”

“Me, too.” My chest, which I didn’t even realize was tight, loosens and I breathe easier.

“This time, no taking chances. You work from the office for those nine months. Agreed?”

“Yeah, yeah... sure.” *His stipulation throws a monkey wrench into my plans.*

“And not until we pay off the plumber. I suspect we may need to take out a loan.”

“Yup. Absolutely. We should wait.” *Shit.* This is probably not the best time to let him know how I neglected to take a few pills and am likely in my sixth week or so.

*Damn cat.* I picture the pink plastic case by the sink and the day I noticed it missing. My conniving feline must've pawed it into the garbage, and we would've been fine if I'd used backup protection. But I totally forgot, which is why I always keep the birth control where I can see it.

Biting my right glove, I free my fingertips, call, and leave the plumber a message. "Hey. It's Sam Sutcliff, Vincent Vitale's niece? Have you had a chance to investigate our little, tiny, smell issue?"

"You think those tactics gonna help?" Suds shakes his head as I nod mine up and down.

"We need our house back by Christmas. Besides, my uncle is the one who recommended him. He needs to step up. He's a crime boss, for fuc-fudge sake." I glance down at Mikey trotting alongside us, but I don't think he heard.

"I keep telling you babe, don't use his references." My husband tweaks my nose with the one hand not in a sling.

"Hey, I asked my parents, Aunt Marion, and the blue-haired salon ladies. They all said this guy is the best."

"Well, if they agreed, who am I to argue?" Ignoring his sarcasm, I move in front of him and nip his earlobe.

"If Uncle Vinnie can get us a discount, we can work hard at making another mini-me."

He turns his head, lifts Mikey onto a hip, and kisses me. "Because nothing says Christmas like hot sex with a danger magnet."

"Oh, do not start that shit... to my Lou, my darlin'." As I sing the last words and tickle my little boy, he laughs.

"Nice catch." Suds grins. "A little out of tune, though."

"Was not." I poke at his chest and whisper in his ear. "I am not the one who got shot, mister."

"I was workin' as a bodyguard, sugar. It's different. I'm prepared for trouble. You jes' walk down the street and danger comes flyin' at your head for no reason at all."

“Not so.” My lower lip sticks out and as I cross my arms, my annoying man chuckles.

“Wahl, we can agree to disagree. But first, let me ask, do you have your weapon on you?” He stares at my coat where a bulge would be, had I decided to wear my holster.

“God no, we’re buying a shrub, for heaven’s sake. Do you?”

He unzips the down vest and shows me where he’s wearing the pistol on the opposite side of where it’s normally placed. “Honey, where my family is concerned, I take no chances.”

“Right, because nothing says Christmas like a shootout at the OK Corral and Tree Emporium.”

## Chapter 2

### Suds

A second child? As much as I'd like to have another rugrat underfoot, I'm not sure we're ready. Hell, we can barely afford the family we've got. If that ain't bad enough, we're living in her uncle's apartment building again, and purchasing a stolen Christmas tree. Fell off a truck, my ass.

We stroll by Marion's hair salon, and wave at her through the window, decorated by local kids. My wife's aunt, a lovely olive-skinned woman in her fifties, steps outside and gives my son a hug.

When she pulls away, Mikey beams and stretches his arms wide. "Daddy's buyin' a kwismas tree, thiiiiis big."

"Well, go on then." Laughing, she turns to my wife who's already rushing down the sidewalk after my non-stop kid.

"Wait. Are you still coming in on Monday?" At Marion's shout, my danger magnet trots backwards.

"I'll be there with bells on. I may need some assistance. I'm chairing St. Thomas' fundraiser."

"What happened to Suzi Baker? She's done it for years." As the older woman's mouth drops open, I lift Mikey into my arms, and my gal shrugs.

"She moved, so Sister Mary Carol asked me to help. What's the problem?"

"Did she hand over her spreadsheets?" Paling, her voice goes up a notch and when Sam indicates no, she pulls rosary beads out of her apron.

Kissing them, she makes a sign of the cross. "We need her paperwork, immediately, if not sooner."

"Ah... Okay. I'll call her." Eyes wide, my wife bites her lower lip and mutters under her breath. "Shit."



“What was that all about?” Ignoring my laser-like stare, she tugs down on her hat and tries to scamper away.

In two strides, I catch up.” Samantha, talk to me.”

Standing in front of the hardware store, she jabs the walk button, and lifts her gaze. “I have no clue. Sister stopped me in the hall and asked me to volunteer to chair Mikey’s school raffle event and I agreed. I thought I’d work at the hair salon and ask some of the wealthier clients for donations.”

“So, when is this shindig?” When you’ve been married long enough, you know when a whole lot of poop is about to hit the fan.

“About a week before Christmas. Listen, it’s not hard. People collect contributions, we wrap them up, and have a little party.”

*Something’s not adding up.* Mouth pursed, I ponder all the types of things that could go wrong. “Hmm...”

“What exactly, is that supposed to mean?” Her pretty eyes spark as she studies my face.

“Wahl sugar, I think wherever you go trouble follows.” Taking her arm, I point out the flashing stick man and after checking for crazy Brooklyn drivers, walk my family across the street.

On the opposite side, we climb the curb where Samantha playfully punches my arm. “You need to stop conjuring the worst scenarios in your head. You know what they say, if you speak of the devil, he’s sure to pop up.”

“I got one better. *Be sober, be watchful. Your adversary the devil, as a roaring lion, walketh about, seeking whom he may devour.*” I grin because I ain’t one to be spoutin’ bible verses and I caught her off guard.

“Says the man recovering from a gunshot wound.” My wife smirks, thinking she won the argument, but I’m not done yet and try another angle.

“Babe, if we’re thinkin’ about havin’ another baby, you need to be more protective of your time.”

Mikey, who's been running ahead on the leash, turns back and tugs on Sam's coat. "Mommy, I'm cold."

"How about we stop and get warmed up before we pick out a tree?" I point out Petey's place and we re-cross the street.

As I open the door, baking pizza makes my stomach grumble, but it's too early for lunch. "How about some hot chocolate?"

"Yuppers." Our little man grins as we take off his outerwear and settle him in a booster seat.

The proprietor tilts his head up from where he throws a pie in the air. "Hey Sammy, how about you get rid of the bum and marry me?"

"Sure, when pigs fly." Frowning, my spouse strides to the espresso machine behind the counter and makes our drinks. As it froths up a storm, Sam's uncle Vinny steps out from his secret room in back of the freezer.

"Yo, I thought I heard your voice. *Buongiorno a tutti.*" Vitale kisses both her cheeks and gives my son a hug.

Then, he eyes me as an adversary because despite being family, I am. "What brings youz guyz out on a cold morning like dis?"

"A kwissmas twee." My boy points out the window toward the formerly vacant lot which now has multiple pines leaning against the twisted metal fencing.

"Great choice." He bites on his unlit cigar. "Price is right, too. Cash only."

The mobster narrows his gaze at me. "Dey fell off a truck."

"Yeah, so we were told." As a rule, I don't approve of purchasing stolen merchandise, but a two-hundred-dollar disposable decoration seems like a waste of hard-earned money.

While I contemplate my place in hell for buying a pilfered pine tree to celebrate the birth of our Lord, I ignore Vinny and Sam's conversation about folks I've never heard of.

Without warning, Vitale shouts and the veins in his forehead pop out. “You did what?”

“Father O’Connell said it was no big deal.” My little lady’s eyes plead with me, demanding I have her six, but I haven’t been listening.

The crime boss places his palms on the table. “Of course, he did. He’s senile. Jesus, Mary and Joseph. Were you brought up under a rock? You mess this up, da whole family takes a hit. Let me do dis for youz.”

She shakes her head so adamantly, her pink fuzzy hat falls to the floor. “No, no. I got this. A donation would be helpful, but no more than a few hundred bucks.”

“I’ll have Joey drop it off.” He shouts to Petey. “Did you hear dat? She’s in charge of the freakin’ auction.”

The pizzaman slides a pie out of the oven using a long paddle, turns, and tsk-tsks under his breath. “It’s been nice knowin’ youz.”

An ex-navy SEAL, I stomp to the counter where dough spins in the air. “Exactly what kind of hole has my wife fallen into?”

He grins. “The last person to fuck up the fundraiser got excommunicated by the pope.”

“You gotta be shittin’ me.” I roll my eyes, but his face stays dead serious.

“What? I’m not making this up.”

“Awesome.” Muttering to myself, I go back, and slide in the booth next to my wife. For an incredibly intelligent woman, she has blind spots, her old alma mater being one of them.

After Vinny crawls back in his hole, we finish our hot drinks, and hike to the corner lot where we pick out a tree.

The decision made, I turn over the blue tag and almost lose my fuckin’ mind. “A hundred and fifty bucks for a stolen shrubbery? We can purchase a fake one online for half the price.”

“Shush.” Samantha hands the money over to our teenage salesman. “Nothing says the holidays like the smell of true pine.”

“Tell you what. I’ll buy you some of them air fresheners. We can put ’em everywhere.” Turning from her, I help the scrawny kid saw off the end piece of wood and push the branches through the plastic netting machine. Once we’re ready to go, I lift the middle with my unhurt arm.

The wife balances the bottom and points Mikey to the front. “Grab the tip, honey.”

Feeling a whole lot poorer, I bring the ridiculously expensive prize to our real home; the one I am paying mortgage on, which is the one I can’t currently live in.

“Let’s lock it in the shed.” Sam drops her end and latches onto Mikey’s hand.

“Why not let me set it up inside?”

“I don’t think you, or we... want to go in there.” Her pretty nose scrunches up but me, being a manly man, decide to show her up.

“A little ol’ smell don’t bother me none.” Opening the front door, I cover my nostrils and walk on over to the bathroom. Nothing’s flowing out of the bowl, but it sure doesn’t look kosher to me.

Her choice to move us to Vinny’s apartment makes a lot more sense. Back outside, I tug her aside. “Exactly when did you say Sal is coming?”

Her eyes lower to her boots where she kicks the gravel. “Maybe Monday?”

I *will* get to the truth, but it needs to wait because Mikey starts to cry. “I want my own bed.”

“Yeah, I know pal. Me too, but we can’t.” I climb him up our front stairs, crack open the door, and he puts his mittens to his nose.

“Ewww. Poopy.” As he scrunches up his face, I squat to his level, and tuck his chin.

When I'm sure he's listening, I use my no-nonsense tone. "That's why we gotta stay at the apartment until the plumber fixes it. Understand?"

"O-tay daddy." My sweet little kid nods, and I tousle his hat.

"Good boy. How about we find the swings?"

"Playground!" He races down the drive and I catch up before he reaches the street.

"Hold on there, kiddo." I snap on his leash, understanding better why his mom bought it. The kid is fast as fuck. Obviously, he takes after me.

While we play, a younger tyke comes close and Sam shouts out, "Careful. The daycare teacher said our little angel's been shoving his friends. You can help him to use more of his words. You know, teach our son to tell people to back off instead of using his hands?"

"Huh. Seems to me, you need some ramblin' lessons, dude."

My boy giggles and I tickle him for a second before racing him to the swings. As I push, I pull out my phone and call Slate.

"How's the injury?" My pal never uses greetings and even though I'm used to it, the overall effect can be abrupt.

My right bicep still causes pain when flexed, but it's usable. "I won't be lifting weights anytime soon, but it's healing. About that, I was wondering if you got any jobs for a cripple?"

He chuckles. "Can't you take a couple days of disability?"

Sighing heavily, I picture the price tag on that tree and everything else. "To be honest, a few bucks under the table would help this time of year."

"See our shrink, yet?"

"C'mon Slate, I don't need none of that mumbo-jumbo. I sustained worse injuries in boot camp."

“I hear you bro, but it’s not my policy, it’s Grayson’s. Come in on Monday, get it done, and then we’ll talk.” In his typical fashion, he hangs up without saying goodbye.

Dammit. He’s the ornery bastard who needs his head shrunk, not me. Finished grumbling, I hike Mikey to my shoulders and ignore the pain near my stitches.

“Wuv you, daddy.” My pride and joy wraps his arms around my neck and kisses the top of my head.

“Love you too, buddy.” Leaning over, I kiss my wife’s pink cheek. “Love you, too, sweetheart.”

## Chapter 3

Sam

After dinner, we watch Mikey's favorite dinosaur movie for the b'zillionth time, then put him to bed.

In the hallway, my husband steps behind me and nuzzles my neck. "How about you and me heat up them sheets?"

"I don't know. Fucking a danger magnet? Who knows what could explode?" I turn in his arms, our mouths meet, and as we kiss, he presses me against the wall.

When we stop for air, he grinds his hard want into my need. "I don't scare easily."

"That so?" Panties soaked, my legs wrap around his waist. Holy shit, I'm about to climax from dry humping my husband in the hallway.

A groan emits from his chest and somehow, we make it to the bedroom where he sets me on the mattress.

"Fuck." Slipping out of his sling, he struggles with his tiny buttons.

"No worries. I got this." Once I undo his fasteners, I lower his sweatpants below his butt, kiss his navel, and release his thick cock.

"Sugar..." As his tip jerks toward my face, I sit on the bed, and lick the precum.

"Lawd, what you do to me." Fisting my hair, he pushes me lower, and I take him in.

While twinges of desire shoot to my core, I wrap my arms around his thighs and bob faster. The more he groans and bucks, the wetter I become.

As I prepare to swallow, he slides an index finger between my lips, releases the suction, and jumps on his back with his flagpole high. "Yippee-ki-yay. Ride 'em cowboy."

My clit clenches as I struggle out of my tight stretchy jeans and sweater. When my workout bra rolls and gets stuck, he chuckles and tugs it over my head.

Finally naked, I crawl up his body and kiss the tip of his cock. “Hello stranger, miss me?”

My husband moans. “Damn straight.”

“Yes, he is.” While I lean over to finish what I began, he pulls me by the armpits until I’m sitting on his face, and hisses.

“You are so damn beautiful.” His clever tongue brings me to the edge of heaven.

About to blast off, I lift, back up, and sink down fully on his huge saddle horn. “Oh shit. You feel so good.”

“You do.” He arches up so far, he hits my go-button.

While I race out of the gate, he reaches and cups my breasts, which makes me ride even faster.

“On three.” His brows crease, his eyes heat, and he thrusts up. “One.”

“Holy shit.” My boobs bounce, flesh slaps flesh, and the headboard bangs against the wall.

“Two.” His hand moves south, and he fingers my nub.

“Three!” Shouting, I shoot to the stars, he follows, and several satisfied grunts later, he falls flat on the mattress.

Sometime in the night, I wake covered in blankets, naked, and sticky. “Babe?”

He snores. Poor dear. He’s so strong I forget he’s not superman. He needs to heal and sleep. In the morning, I will tell him about my missed period and how I may be pregnant. He’ll be well rested and after the initial shock, I’m sure he’ll be overjoyed. I recall how I told him the first time, and smile. I’ve never seen him so happy.

He’s such a great dad.



I fall deep asleep and wake from a nightmare where I'm drowning and can't breathe. Eyes wide now, I realize I'm about to die but can't scream because Suds has his fingers wrapped around my throat. Thinking of his remorse should he kill me, I strengthen my resolve and stretch for the lamp on the bedstand.

When I locate the base, I crash it across his wounded shoulder.

"What the...?" His lids lift, his mouth opens in terror, and after releasing my neck, he curls up in a corner.

"Honey, no, don't." I wrap myself around him as he sobs into his knees. "It was only for a second."

"Jesus. Don't touch me." He pushes me away, but we've been here before and I know what he needs.

Undaunted, I kiss the top of his head, his nose, and as I find his lips, my palms cup his rough cheeks. "It's okay, tough guy. Nothing happened."

Finding his cell phone, he turns on the flashlight app, and shines it below my chin. "Fuck, Sam. I am so, so, sorry I hurt you."

"We'll get your sleep machine in the morning. No big deal. Getting shot probably triggered your PTSD."

"Damn. Back to square one. This shit never ends." Sounding defeated, he shakes his head and wipes his eyes.

The only way to slay those dragons, is one at a time and as his wife, it's my job to help. "Do you remember the nightmare?"

"No, not a bit." His tone tells me he's telling the truth, so there's no point in questioning him further.

"Mommy?" Mikey tries the handle of our locked door and as he raps his knuckles on the wood, I crack open the entrance.

"Go back to bed. Daddy had a bad dream."

He forces his way inside, sits in his father's lap and puts a palm to his wet cheek. "Dreams is not weal. O-tay?"

“Copy that, pal.” After my husband tousles his son’s hair, my sweet kid takes his dad’s hand and walks him to the kitchen.

Standing on tip toes, the boy opens the refrigerator door. “Time for warm milk.”

When my eyes stop watering, I take a deep breath and put a pan on the stove. Not long after, our little man settles down and falls asleep on the couch, but his dad and I are wide awake.

“What really happened in DC, honey?” Sitting at the kitchen table, I rest my hand on his knee.

He glances up, holds my gaze, then grimaces. “It’s pretty much what you heard on the news. A militia group carrying automatic rifles showed up to the anti-gun protest. One crazy mother-fucker wanted to take down my client, along with as many protesters as he could. Most of them were teens or collegiates. Hell, Sam, it could’ve been a blood bath.”

“But you stopped them.” My hand runs up and down his arm as he shudders.

“At what cost?” Standing, he stares out the back window. “I haven’t had an episode like that in years... or have I?”

I step behind him, slip my arms around his waist, and rest my chin on his back. “I would’ve said so, sweetheart.”

Face sad, he turns. “Before you ask, Slate scheduled me a shrink appointment. I really didn’t want to rehash the shooting. I even joked about it. God, I’m such an idiot.”

“Don’t beat up on yourself. Besides, I hated that lamp. It’s given me the heebie-jeebies for years.”

“Which part? The blue monkey or the pink tasseled parasol?” At his lopsided grin, I pull a broom and dustpan from under the sink, then lead him back to the bedroom.

While we’re sweeping up pieces of glass, my cousins’ muffled voices sound from the apartment below. Soon, my phone pings, and a message appears on my screen.

Rose: What happened?

Me: Suds had a bad dream.

Rose: Should I ask Hands to call?

Me: Not yet.

Without warning, my stomach heaves. Hand to my mouth, I race down the hall, and reach the toilet just in time. When a broom handle taps on my floor, I moan and check the incoming text.

Rose: I heard you.

Flushing, I lean my back against the wall and send a sick face emoji. Shit. I hate this part of pregnancy.

She rings me and before I can say *buongiorno*, she asks, “Did you tell him?”

“No. And don’t give me grief. He doesn’t need any more stress. I will soon. I promise.” I hang up, puke once more, brush my teeth, and put on warm clothes.

By the time Mikey wakes and we’ve eaten breakfast, I feel almost normal.

“Ready to take the train, tiger?” Suds tosses our Eveready Bunny in the air and when he sets him down, the boy runs into his bedroom.

“Rarw!” Our independent dresser returns wearing his favorite shirt inside out, and while my husband turns it around, I pack a knapsack.

By the time I’m done, they’re dressed for the cold and waiting at the door.

“Love you sugar, and don’t fret none. I got this.” At my husband’s hang dog face, I hug him to my chest.

“Don’t you worry, either. I’m going to spend the whole day sending invoices. Divorces-R-Us is not a charity and people

need to pay up.”

For the first time today, he seems more like himself and smiles. “Because nothing says the holidays like cheatin’ spouses caught with their pants down.”

“Correct.”

After I kiss my men goodbye, my husband opens the back door, and winks. “If Slate don’t have work for me, guess I’ll earn a few bucks as a gigolo.”

“If you want a stellar recommendation, let me know.” Wagging my brows, I smirk until he grins and trots down the back stairs.

Once they’re out of sight, I slip a wool scarf around my bruised neck and meander to the middle apartment’s kitchen.

“How’s Suds?” Rose scrapes her chair closer to Mia, making space for me.

Sitting, I sigh. “He’s a little stressed. There’s the shooting, of course, and I think he was counting on bodyguard work to cover Christmas expenses, as well.”

“I have savings you can borrow.” My sainted younger cousin pours herself another coffee and when she holds the carafe over my cup, I shake my head, no.

“Thanks, but you and Hands have plenty of uses for your money. We’re fine. Really.”

“Joey says business has been slow.” Rose tilts her head and like always, tries to will the truth out of me but I’ve worked for the FBI and have honed my evasiveness skills.

“With inflation at an all-time high, everyone is tightening their belts, but things will turn around. They always do.” I force an optimistic smile on my face, but my older cousin simply narrows her gaze.

“You need to tell your husband you’re expecting and stop agreeing to take on other people’s problems.”

“What? I don’t.” A cheese danish calls out my name so I snatch it off the plate.

As I moan at the deliciousness, Mia frowns. “What about filling in at my mom’s shop? She could’ve found someone else to cover vacations.”

Swallowing hard, I confess. “Actually, I was the one who approached her.”

Knowing how I feel about washing hair, Mia’s jaw drops. “Why on earth would you do that?”

“Well, first off, you two will be there and secondly, I need raffle donations.” It’s not like I haven’t covered before. Marion’s hair salon has more intel on the neighborhood than the CIA and the FBI combined.”

“So, Petey wasn’t shitting us.” My oldest cousin recovers first. “Oh my God. What happened to Suzi? She’s done it for years.”

“I heard she moved out of state.” At my honest statement, Mia shoves a palm to my forehead.

“Because she blew it last year. If you screw up again, the school closes.”

For the first time since agreeing to chair the event, panic creeps into my bones. “What? I thought it was a simple fund raiser?”

“Oh my fucking lord. How long have you lived here?” As Rose buries her head in her hands, I try to remember anything but come up blank.

“How bad could it be?” *In all fairness, after college, I did live in DC for a few years.*

Her glare across the table melts the back of my irises. “Seriously?” You’ll need local business owners to donate gifts, and expensive ones. Then, you must invite people from all five boroughs which means incentives and advertising and... Fuck. You have no idea what you’re up against, right?”

As she stares at me, my stomach churns. “I figured I’d start with the salon.”

Shaking her head, the dark-haired woman who’s been more like a sister stands and opens her phone. “I will call Suzi.

She has ten years of experience that we can use.”

Mia pops up next to her. “As soon as she has the volunteers’ names, I will organize a team.”

Finally understanding my impossible situation, I clunk my forehead on the table. In complete sync with my mood, the wind picks up and water pelts their back window.

Standing, I stroll to their living room, gaze out at the small courtyard, and check the weather on my phone. “Shit. Can you guys help me move my pine-sicle into my house before work?”

They both groan but agree.

After donning raincoats, we all pile down the stairs where Joey peers up from his TV. He takes in our rubber boots, umbrellas, and smirks. “Where’re youz guyz off to?”

“My house, why?”

He grins wider. “Don’t tell me the brilliant private eye left her Christmas tree outside to freeze?”

“Shut it, jerk-face.” Outside, I mutter under my breath, “God, now I remember why we moved.”

“Ditto.” My cousins respond in unison, laugh, then high-five each other.

Soon we’re gossiping like old times and before long, reach my front yard. Once I unlock the gated fence, we walk to the back where we grab the trunk and squeeze the branches to fit inside the kitchen door.

Speaking while holding her nose, Mia looks around the room. “Where do you want it?”

“In the tub? That way it won’t drip all over the hardwood floors.” I point to the bathroom and as we lean the trunk against the tiles, Rose covers her mouth.

“Holy Mother of God, what is that stench?”

Eyes watering, I moan, race the two outside, and gasp for air. “Sal said something about a trap, but he promised he is coming soon.”

The oldest groans. “So is Christmas. Are you certain you don’t want to take the tree back to the apartment?”

Tears well, a sign hormones are eating me from the inside out. “No. This is our first holiday in our new home. Salvatore is going to fix this, even if I have to place a gun to his head to get it done.”

Realizing I need to up the urgency, I scroll through my phone, call the plumber, and his wife answers, “Palermo’s fast friendly service.”

“Hey, Lolly, is Sal available?”

“Sorry hun, he’s on a job.”

“Do you know when he’s getting to my house?”

“Give me a sec... Let me see.” Papers crunch in the background. “Hold on, he put his schedule around here somewhere. Ah, I found it. He can fix the smell today, but you won’t be able to use the john until a joint comes in. The earliest would be end of week.”

*Exactly how is that helpful?* “We only have the one bathroom.” My voice exits as an unfortunate screech.

Luckily, she doesn’t seem to notice. “If you want, we could order you a port-o-potty at cost.”

“Because nothing says Christmas like an outhouse.” No longer able to contain my snark, I’m about to say more.

Before I lose it, Mia grabs my phone. “Can you see if the part can be expedited?”

“Sure thing, hun. I’ll call you back and let you know.”

“Thanks.” The sainted one hangs up and as she hands me back the phone, I hang my head.

“I guess there’s nothing more to be done.”

Ever the optimist, Mia pipes up. “We could rent gas masks and help you decorate.”

Picturing it in my head, I laugh it all off. “Let’s go. We’re going to be late for work.”

## Chapter 4

Suds

“Hey buddy.” Slate lifts my son and tucks him in a booster seat in the conference room.

After the two share a high-five, my friend places a Batman coloring book on the glass table. With Mikey scribbling away, the two of us are free to speak.

So, how’re you doing?” As he sets a cup of coffee in front of me and studies my face, I hold his gaze, careful not to blink.

“My shoulder’s healin’. You said you had some papers for me to sign?”

“Yeah, for disability. You look like shit. What’s up?” His built-in lie detector is damn near perfect, so I tell as much of the truth as I dare.

“I woke up in the night a few times. You know, kids, bad dreams, and such.” Hopefully, he won’t inquire further because if he learns I’m battling PTSD again, he could bench me.

Brows raised, he sighs, and hits send on his laptop. “I scheduled your appointment for Monday. That work?”

“Yeah, sure. No problem.” Keeping any emotion off my face, I count my blessings.

“What? No argument?” His head tilts and I backpedal, wondering if I fucked up.

*Dammit. When was the last time I didn’t complain about having to see a shrink?* Quickly, I add some clever embellishment. “My ramblin’ is gettin’ rusty. I need a new audience to practice on.”

Because I caught him off guard, I catch him in a rare chuckle. “It figures.”



He hands me a manilla envelope marked TOP SECRET in red. “Read this over and tell me if you’re interested.”

Pulling out the paperwork, I peruse the intel on a militia group, and stop at the guy who shot me. “Well hell, you got my attention. What’s the job?”

“They’re planning something big, and the government boys asked us to find out.”

“Count me in. Taking down those wanna-be assholes would be the best present ever.” A flash of memory starts my heart pumping, but I stomp it down real fast. I got no time for a panic attack. It’ll have to wait.

Nodding, he stands, and slaps me on the back which means our meeting is over. “I’ll send you a secure link. Welcome aboard.”

“Thanks.” I gather up Mikey, shoot the shit with a new guy for a while, then take my son to visit the Rockefeller Christmas Tree.

As we mosey on back toward the subway stop, my wife rings. “How’d it go?”

“Fine. He gave me some work and I got an appointment to speak with Patten’s shrink.”

“Really? And you agreed to talk?”

“Yes ma’am.” I make the mistake of grinning which she no doubt picks up on.

“Suds, oh my God, no rambling.”

“No ma’am. I wouldn’t dream of it.” So she won’t hear me laughing, I mute the phone, but I wasn’t fooling no one.

Her snort speaks volumes. “Whatever, but that’s not why I called. The plumber came to fix the trap, but he said the problem must’ve attracted a rat and it died someplace in one of our walls.”

“Aw, nothin’ says Christmas like the odor of deceased rodent.” I laugh because once I get rid of the animal, we can go back home.

“Not funny.”

Sam should sound happier. Maybe she doesn't understand I can take care of this little issue. “I tell you what. After brunch tomorrow, we'll go check it out and move out of Vinny's apartment.”

Her heavy sigh sets my spidey senses on high alert. “Yeah, about that... Sal ordered a part but because of supply problems and the fact our plumbing is over seventy years old, it may take a week... or even more to fix the toilet.”

I cringe. “Sugar, I may need to resort to violence.”

“I'm with you, tough guy. I'll call around and see if there's another plumber available.” Once she hangs up, Mikey and I head home, and the rest of the day flies by.

Before long, it's Sunday church and we're sitting in the last pew, listening to the second-best rambler in the world, Monsignor O'Connell.

He gives thirty minutes of the most convoluted sermon I ever heard. After he says amen, I want to applaud but Sam throws a hymnal in my hand.

“Sing.”

Mikey, holding his picture book bible, glances up at me. “Wamblin' daddy?”

I whisper in his ear. “Yup. Father O is the greatest, next to me, of course.”

Chuckling, I open to the psalm and belt it out. My kid does, too, which makes the elderly ladies in front of us turn and smile.

We stand up, sit down, kneel, and pray for another thirty minutes. When we're done, I walk out the door and shake the old priest's hand. “Finest damn sermon I ever heard. I swear you get better every time I listen.”

Old eyes water as he smiles. “Why thank you, Sebastian. So many people simply don't appreciate how hard I work to prepare the word of God such that it can be understood in today's modern world.”

“Goin’ from drinkin’ and gamblin’ to lovin’ one another but not livin’ in sin? The importance of marriage but not spendin’ too much on Christmas presents? Moses wanderin’ in the desert? Then, you tied it all up in a tidy knot by makin’ sure the parishioners donate to the school’s upcomin’ auction. Your speech was masterful and I, for one, am in awe of the way you brought up all them important topics at the same time.”

The old man wipes his glasses and beams at my praise. “Thank you, son. God bless you.”

Behind me, my wife tugs on my jacket. “C’mon, honey. My mom is waiting, and Mikey has to pee.”

“Copy that. Bye y’all.” I wave to the people in line to talk to the priest, put my mini-me on my shoulders, and whistle tunelessly while we walk to my in-laws’ house.

Once there, I set my boy on his great-grandmother’s lap, “*Bongiourno*, Nonna.”

“Sebastian, *sono contento di vederti.*”

“We’re happy to see you, too.” Sam kisses the old woman’s wrinkled cheek, then leads us into the dining room where Vincent sits next to a college-aged female. From her looks, I assume she’s another cousin I haven’t met.

Because they’re speaking in Italian, I stroll to the kitchen where my father-in-law, Captain Sutcliff, leans against the refrigerator.

Before I can back away, he blocks my exit. “Hell of a thing, getting shot.”

“Yes sir.” Based on experience, it’s best to agree with my wife’s father on all occasions.

“You think it’s time to find a new profession?” He says it like there’s all sorts of openings for people having my skill set so, I wing it.

“I was lookin’ into a course in accountin’ or maybe embalmin’. Death and taxes are two things you can count on in life.” Because I manage to keep a straight face, the man

thinks I'm serious and for the first time ever, I have stunned him into silence.

“What are you two talking about?” Sam enters the already crowded kitchen and shoots me an inquisitive look.

Smiling, I wink. “Career changes.”

Vincent, who I didn't notice entering, squeezes into the small space and points his unlit cigar at me. “If youz need a job, I got work.”

*Excellent. Maybe I can ask Frankie-the-hitman for a few hints.*

While I'm trying to formulate an appropriate response which won't insult him, Saint Mia calls out from the dining room, “He's going to be busy helping Sam with St. Thomas' fund raiser.”

My mother-in-law, Donna, drops her spoon. “No. You didn't.”

As it clatters in the delicate teacup, Marion gasps. Nonna wards off evil by making a circle in the air and the men cross themselves. Their reactions are far worse than the day Samantha announced she was gonna marry me. I ain't never seen anything like it.

“Why would you do such a thing?” Sitting in the dining room, my wife's mother uses a cloth napkin as a fan while her daughter rolls her eyes.

“Why volunteer? I don't know. Maybe because Sister Mary Carol asked me to?”

Joey snickers. “She *axed* me, and I said I was way too busy.”

“You could've warned me.” Sam throws a sweet roll at him.

Catching it midair, he takes a bite and talks with his mouth full. “You're the former FBI agent. Figured you, of all people would know better.”

“She’s going to get excommunicated.” Marion wrings her hands and Rose kisses her cheek.

“Don’t worry, Momma, I’ll ask Nonna to write the pope.”

“Won’t they close the school without money?” When Joey’s second-grader tugs on her dad’s sleeve, Sam whistles shrilly through her teeth, shutting everyone up.

“Why do you guys think I’m about to fail? I got this. Jeesh!”

Figuring she’s about to have a meltdown, I take her arm and glance down at my phone. “Well, hell. How time flies when you’re having family fun. Nice seein’ y’all. We have another important date. Seems we got a rat in the wall to get rid of.”

Uncle Vincent chuckles. “I got a guy for that.”

“Thank you kindly, but we’ll take a rain check.” I race into the bedroom to find our coats, and Mia follows.

“I promised Mikey we’d bake cookies. How about you leave him here? Later, I’ll take him to the park and bring him home all tired out.”

“Thanks.” Sam kisses her cheek. “I read online the smell could arrest his emotional development and scar him for life.”

She giggles. “If it’s as bad as before, I don’t doubt it.”

After saying our goodbyes, Samantha and I depart. On the doorstep, I pause. “You okay, sugar?”

My palm cups her face and as her long lashes lift, she shakes her head back and forth. “Oh my God, no. I had no idea the fund raiser was such a big deal.”

I press her against the building and kiss her until her eyes warm and her face says Sunday-sex. “Babe, I believe in you. You can do this. You’re a brilliant analyst.”

She swallows hard. “It’s a penny auction and breakfast with Santa. How bad could it be?”

“Don’t jinx it, sweetheart.” As Sam describes her ideas, I help her brainstorm, and by the time we reach our home, we

both feel better.

As I crack open the front door, a whiff of human decay hits my nostrils, and I shut it fast. “I guess we should’ve taken Vincent up on his offer. Stay put.”

Unholstering my weapon, my foot steps inside. “I’m going in.”

## Chapter 5

Sam

I reach in my purse, push aside my lucky rosary beads, and pull out my Sunday-best pistol. Back-to-back, guns out, my husband and I move inside. The horrid smell seems to be coming from our living room but other than our gorgeous, seven-foot Christmas tree, nothing appears out of place.

“Meeee-ow-umph.” Catrina flies off the fridge, ricochets off the kitchen table, and as she thumps on the floor, I scream.

“Fuck.” Shuddering, I lower my weapon and my husband hisses through his teeth.

Clueless to her peril, the feline stares at the cabinet, at me, then prances to her food bowl.

As she quivers her tail and meows, Suds whispers, “Hold your horses, cat. Dead bodies first, kibbles second.”

Motioning me to stay, gun raised, the bad-ass makes his way down the hallway. As he checks all the bedrooms, the cat pitter-padders behind him.

“All clear.” Safety on, brows furrowed, he walks me toward our one-hundred-and-fifty-dollar pine.

When we get close, Catrina skitters across the floor and climbs to the top of the tree where she yowls nonstop.

“Oh my God, get down. If you didn’t make such a fuss about Chloe visiting, you’d be safe and sound at Joey’s.” I grab her by the scruff of her neck, but she refuses to go and digs her claws into the branches.

Without warning, she releases the bough and as it springs back into place, a small bit of flesh rolls on my hardwood floor.

“Holy fuck. Is that a finger?” Hand to my mouth, my feet race toward the bathroom until I recall our plumbing issues,

and swivel in the opposite direction. I barely make it to the kitchen sink before puking.

As I lose my breakfast, my partner slips his calloused hands behind my neck and lifts my hair. “I don’t want to nitpick, but you might want to rethink your holiday decorations.”

“Ugh. Not funny.” Legs shaking, I sit while he runs the faucet and turns on the garbage disposal.

Once the cat is fed, Suds uses our barbecue tongues to place the detached finger in a plastic baggie.

After zipping it shut, he returns to my side with a wet paper towel. “You want to explain what’s goin’ on?”

“Outside. Now.” I pull him through the front door and plop on the steps.

While I inhale blessed Brooklyn air, he puts an elbow on his knee and frowns. “I don’t ever recall you losin’ your cookies at the sight of a dead body, let alone a piece of one.”

*Shit.* I fast forward to when our future son or daughter asks, “When did you first tell Daddy you were expecting me?”

This moment could be etched in our family history forever and I will not equate having a baby with a grotesque ornament.

Mind made up, I tell the truth, just not all of it. “My stomach has been off. Really, it’s nothing to be concerned about. Let’s not focus on me. Instead, we should concentrate on how a piece of flesh ended up in our tree.”

“Obviously, nothing says the holidays like gifting a middle finger.” At his chuckle, I roll my eyes, brush off my jeans, and stand.

“We’re going to get our money back. End of story.”

His palms cup my cheek with one hand and slips a peppermint into my mouth with the other. “Now sugar, don’t go making a big mystery out of a molehill. Some unfortunate soul probably had an accident when he cut the trunk.”



The candy settles my stomach but I'm not changing my mind. "I paid for *eau du* Tannenbaum, not *eau du* morgue."

Winking, he kisses the tip of my nose. "How about we stroll on back to the lot and talk to the owner. There's no point in dragging a seven-foot pine all around Brooklyn until we're sure he'll refund our money."

"Fine. But I'm not taking no for an answer." As we start to leave, I turn back to our house, and run up the steps. "Wait. Your sleep monitor is in the hall closet. I'll go get it."

The way his brows crease, I'm almost sorry I mentioned it. Back outside, I hand him the paper bag and we walk in silence until we arrive at the corner lot where we bought the accursed fir. If not for the carpet of needles, no one would know there were dozens for sale a couple days ago.

Suds scratches his head. "I guess that's that. They must've sold out. I tell you what we're gonna do. I'll move the putrid tree to the curb and leave the finger with the precinct. If we're lucky, we can make love before Mia brings Mikey home."

My clit twitches at the thought of sex but I'm not quite ready to give up. "I paid for pine scent and ended up with Cadaver No5."

"Let's go to our office and study our options." Snickering, he tucks my hand into the crook of his elbow.

As he rushes me down the street, I squeeze his thick bicep. "You just want me alone so you can have your wicked way with me."

"Yes ma'am, and with no interruptions." When he lengthens his strides, I skip to keep up, and grin.

"You couldn't possibly be referring to my dear cousin Joey?"

Stopping at the corner, his dark brows raise, and one side of his mouth curls up. "Or Mia, or Rose, or Frankie, or the hundreds of family members who traipse through the building during fuck-time hours. As I seem to recall, that's why we bought our own goddamn house."

“I know baby. I’m working the problem.” *Is it my fault Sal is the only neighborhood plumber I’m allowed to call?*

At our office door, we climb the narrow stairwell, and walk through the tiny foyer. Inside, we take off our outerwear, then Suds pushes me to the wall.

After a breathtaking kiss, he nips my lower lip and whispers in my ear, “Why can’t we stay here? At least we’d have some privacy.”

I point to the spiral staircase and laugh. “Remember Mikey on those?”

“I’d rope it off.”

“And he’d use it to scale the heights, then find a blanket to parachute over the railing. Our job is to keep him alive until he’s old enough for BUD/S.”

Spotting the open laptop on the conference room table, I login. “Before we jump into bed, can you get a print off the finger ornament?”

He lets out a deep sigh, pulls the baggie out of his pocket and holds it in the air by the sink. “You askin’ for me to unzip this?”

“God, no. Take a screen shot and send it to me. Then... I don’t know... Hide it in the freezer.” Swallowing hard, I turn my head and refuse to watch.

When the image shows up in my inbox, I put it through Patten’s database but get no hits. “Not even a parking ticket.”

“Like I said, sugar, the guy probably cut it off with a power tool. Shit like this happens. Time’s a wastin’. Come to bed.”

“You have an insatiable appetite, Mr. Sutcliff. Give me one more minute. The teen who sold us the tree must know who paid him.”

While I search the local high schools’ websites, Suds stands behind me, cups my breasts, and nibbles my neck. “All work and no play makes Jack a dull boy.”

“Is that what we’re calling him?” No longer able to resist my husband’s clever hands, I swivel my chair, and unzip his jeans.

After wrapping my fingers around his cock, I give the tip a kiss, and ask, “Hey dude, how’s it going?”

“Poor Jack’s got serious catchin’ up to do. He needs sex every day, most often, twice.” Brows creased, Suds sets my butt on the table, steps between my legs, and rubs his hard want against my core. “Damn, I want you.”

I point to the far wall where pre-WWII glass stretches from our floor to the ceiling above the loft. The subway stop across the street is at eye level and people appear to be staring straight at us.

“Babe, are we givin’ out tickets to our free show?”

“At this hour, no one can see through the glare. I’ve checked.” The way he laughs causes me to suck in my breath, and wonder.

“You sure?” Making love in front of a large window is naughty, terrifying, and yet my sex throbs.

Chuckling, he steps out of his clothes and puts his magnificent nakedness on display. “If you want, I could run out and ask.”

My core already wet, I lean back on my elbows and spread my legs. “You better be right.”

“Aren’t I always?” He sits and rolls my office chair until his mouth is at my core. Then, he grabs my thighs and slips his tongue over my clit until I moan.

“Mmm-mmm, I sure missed this.” He sucks on my button, presses a finger to my sweet spot, and fireworks explode behind my eyelids.

While I’m still orgasmically throbbing, he turns me over, slides me to the edge of the table, and thrusts deep inside me. One hand on my back, the other pulling my hair, he drives me wild.

“Oh God.” As my second orgasm looms, he speeds to his release.

“Come with me, darlin’.”

“Ah, ah...” I push back to meet his next thrust, and as I climax, he shudders.

“Daammnn...” Bucking one last time, he collapses on my back. “Hell, I do believe I heard heavenly angels sing.”

“’Tis the season.” My fingers slide through his locks and we lay there for the longest time, simply enjoying a short reprieve from the craziness, otherwise known as our lives.

## Chapter 6

### Suds

Mondays have a way of sneaking up on a body when you're not looking. After sleeping through the night without the alarm going off, Samantha and I drop Mikey off at daycare.

While we're leaving the grade school, Miss Darlene, his teacher, taps my wife on the shoulder. "We're all dying to know your ideas for the fundraiser."

Sam glares, daring me to say something smart-alecky, but I zip my mouth shut. Hell, my gal got herself into this and she's a brilliant woman. I'm sure she'll pull this off like always. Otherwise, we'll be packing up and heading to my mother's old cabin in Utah. It don't bother me none. I've been in some of the most hellish places on earth and learned it ain't where you're at as much as who you're with.

My wife gives my bullet-wounded shoulder a soft pat. "Poor Sebastian was shot on the job a week ago, so I'm a little behind but don't worry, I am on it. Can you please schedule a meeting of last year's volunteers as soon as possible?"

Eyes focused on the young woman, I help Sam by offering up my best sad-eyed, puppy-dog look.

After a few seconds of my secret weapon, the teacher sighs. "Of course. Send me the list and I'll get right on it."

"Thank you, darlin'." I seal the deal with an endearing, adorable wink.

Stunned by my damn cuteness, the woman blushes and before she can regain her common sense, we dash for the door and rush down the school's front steps.

At the bottom, my wife clunks her forehead on the only available solid surface, my chest. "I have no fucking idea how to even get started."

“Get Mikey a passport and we’ll leave the country.” Half-serious, I wrap my arms around her.

“It came in the mail, yesterday.” Grinning, she kisses my astonished face. “What? You realize I can’t be tarred and feathered if they can’t find me.”

With years as a Navy SEAL under my belt, I trained for many dangerous missions, but never a Catholic School charity auction. “Let’s go back to the office and start plannin’.”

“Okay, but first, we need to visit the teenager who sold us the tree.”

*Hell, no. We already got plenty on our plate.* “Honey-”

“Nu-uh. We paid top dollar for real forest smell and am not going to stop until I have the scent of the season, dammit.” She’s so cute when she gets a bee in her bonnet, so I can’t help but tease her a bit more.

“How about I wash the floors with pine-scented cleaner?” My thumb pokes her most ticklish rib, but she cries uncle right away.

“It will only take an hour or so... please?” At her god-awful attempt to flutter her lashes, I let out a huge guffaw.

“Sugar pie, you aren’t a lash-battin’ kind of gal. You’re more of the *grab a bat and start smashin’* woman.” Taking her gloved hand, I walk her back home. Should my luck hold out, I can get in some sweet lovin’ before someone interrupts us.

My beautiful wife skips to catch up, and as a cold rain starts to fall, the wind picks up. “So, are you helping me or not?”

“Only to prevent you from getting into a pickle.” Despite what I’ve said, my second sense has me on high alert.

“Thank you. It means a great dill to me.” At her snicker, I counter with an equally awful pun.

“Well, let’s not dilly-dally.” Grabbing her hand, I start to run.

After we reach our SUV, she wipes raindrops off her long lashes, and uses her phone to find our destination, only a couple miles away. Once we've parked, we walk up the drive, and my wife rings the bell.

Soon, a man in a black t-shirt cracks open the door. "Do I know you?"

"Hi. I'm Samantha Sutcliff, and this is my husband, Sebastian. We'd like to talk to your son about a Christmas tree." Even though she's smiling, her tone sounds authoritative, something she no doubt learned from her police chief dad.

"Yeah? Waddabouddit?" Frowning, the man backs up and as he crosses his arms, I deepen my accent to sound less threatening.

"Wahl, sir. We found something of value in the item he sold us and we're jes' here to give it back."

The guy's shoulders drop, he turns and yells up the stairs. "Ronnie. Some people at the door want to talk to you."

On the floor above, the kid takes one look at us, swivels on his heel, and bolts down the hall.

"Sugar, watch the outside." Pushing past the father, I race up the steps, follow the young man through his bedroom, and out the fire escape.

*Damn, he's fast.* About six feet up, I splash down in a cold puddle, and sprint after him.

Oblivious to the oncoming traffic, he runs across Seventeenth. Having more desire to survive, I slow down. By the time I reach the curb, he's halfway down the block. When I'm about to call it quits, Sam jumps out from an alley and tackles him to the ground. Yanking his arms behind his back, she zip-ties his hands. While she pulls him between the buildings, I stuff a glove in his mouth.

Panting and out of breath, we wait behind a green dumpster. A few seconds later, the kid's father appears, baseball bat in hand.

“Ron? You here?” Upon hearing no reply, his dad leaves and I pull the improvised gag from the teen’s mouth.

“Why’d you run. kid?”

The teen’s eyes widen. “Y-you cops?”

“No, private eyes.” My partner reaches into her back pocket and flashes our license in front of his face.

Ronnie finishes reading and smiles broadly. “You shitting me? Like Sherlock Holmes?”

*Except for the side of the Atlantic, the century, and the fact he was fictional, we’re a perfect match.* “Exactly right.” Pulling a blade from my boot, I slice through his plastic ties. “Sorry about that.”

Brows furrowed, mouth pursed, he first glances at us, then down the street. “Promise you won’t tell my dad?”

“So long as you didn’t cut off somebody’s middle finger, your secrets are safe with us.” My wife throws him a reassuring smile.

Rubbing his wrists, the kid does a double-take. “I’m not a nutcase. Listen, those trees wuz already stolen. The guy stiffed me, so I loaded what was left, took them into the city, and sold them. Fair is fair, right?”

The kid’s dark eyes glance at my spouse for reassurances, and now playing good-cop, she shoots him a toothy grin.” What was this tree-guy’s name, Ron?”

Newly in love, he blushes. “Howie, miss. I never got his last, but he paid me in cash.”

“Did you see his vehicle or notice anything strange about him?” Sam shows him a few images from her phone. “Is he in any of these pictures?”

“Yeah, dats him. The short guy. Looks like Danny DeVito.” He gives me the stink-eye then takes her arm. “How about you and me ditch your partner, and we talk business? Like, I could totally be your eyes and ears on the street.”



Patience at an end, I put my hands on his skinny shoulders, and point him up the block. “Go home, kid, and stay away from stolen trees.”

Back in our SUV, I regard my grinning danger magnet, thumbing her phone. “His name is Howard Mateo. I’ll ask Mia or Rose to pick up Mikey so we can go talk to this guy.”

“Why, on God’s green earth, would we want to do that right now?” Cockblocked, my mouth drops open.

Ignoring other things we could be doing, my partner shrugs. “Simple. Before he bolts, I want our money back.”

## Chapter 7

Sam

During the drive to Howie's, Suds lectures me nonstop about buying stolen goods. "Karma's a bitch. She will bite you in the ass every single time."

As always, the ex-SEAL takes the moral high ground, so I feel obligated to state my case. "The origin of said goods is uncertain. Christmas trees do not come with provenance."

"Stay right to go left." When the map lady sounds from the Bluetooth speakers, Suds grabs the steering wheel, then glances at me like it's my fault.

"What the fuck does that even mean?" Reaching a fork in the road, he turns while I point.

"Middle lane." Confusion over, I heave out a sigh. "Know what? You're right. We need to rethink this whole fell-off-the-truck thing. I'll add it to my list of sins to confess next week."

"Damn, if that's all it takes to get back in God's good graces, I need to convert." My partner often teases about changing religions, then reneges.

This time I'm ready. Glancing over, I stifle a giggle. "Perfect. I'll ask Monsignor to sign you up for classes. Father O'Connell loves you and might even give you a pass on some of the harder assignments. We'll start at adult baptism, invite all our friends, and have a huge christening party."

"If the Almighty wanted me to be a holy roller, I would've known it by now." His jaw drops and he swallows hard.

No longer able to hold back, I laugh out loud. "I was just busting your balls."

"So now you're a nutcracker?" Wiping the sweat off his forehead, he grins, and I squeeze his thigh.

“Plum fairy. Keep up this blasphemy mister, and you’re going straight to hell.” My hand slides higher and as I caress him, a bulge appears behind his fly.

His breath hitches and he shoots me a heated look. “At the next exit, I’m pullin’ off and I am going to strip off your jeans and fuck-”

“Take the next left. Your destination will be on your right.” Interrupted again by the GPS, my partner curses under his breath.

SUV-sex on hold, panties damp, I place Dad’s business card in the front window and jump out. Hopefully, thieves will think twice before stealing our car.

“Wow, nice neighborhood.” Head on a swivel, my spouse steps over dog shit on the sidewalk.

Pulling me closer, he places his hand near his holstered weapon and walks us toward Howie Matteo’s two-story duplex with a postage-stamp front yard. The area contains broken toys, a sink planter and next to the porch, Mother Mary prays under the side of a half-buried bathtub.

The doorbell doesn’t work so we knock. To our right, curtains rustle and a woman in a red reindeer sweater cracks open the door.

“You cops?” As the bleached blond eyes us suspiciously, my partner hands over our business card.

“No, ma’am.” Opening his wallet, he flashes his license. “Private Investigators. Might we be able to speak with your husband?”

Her bitter laugh cuts through the cold. “Take a number, why don’t’cha. The man hasn’t been home for days and I say good riddance. Maybe somebody finally took out the trash.”

“Did you know he was selling stolen Christmas trees?” My question can barely be heard above her deep smoker’s cough.

When she stops, she unwraps a wet, wadded tissue and blows. “Sure, I did, and I told him not to. The weasel is probably hiding from the law or worse. I’m sorry but I don’t

know nothin' more. If you find him, let me know. I'll hire you to serve him the damn divorce papers."

"Will do. Thank you kindly, ma'am." My husband takes my arm and walks me back to the SUV.

As he starts the engine, I sigh. "Shit, what a waste of time."

Sebastian checks the rearview mirror, pulls away from the curb, then squeezes my knee. "How about we take a break, go home, and make love?"

His one-track mind makes me smile. "Because nothing says Christmas like hot sex?"

Turning toward the highway, he winks. "Ya got that right, sweetheart."

My thoughts turn to my son, no doubt having dinner at my mom's. "It'll have to wait until we put Mikey to bed."

"Fine by me." The engine roars, he changes lanes, and glances over the cupholder. "So, babe, I've been thinkin'."

"A very dangerous habit, husband dearest."

"Let me continue, if you wouldn't mind?" Suds' lips purse under his furrowed brows.

Wondering if he's going to broach the subject of having a second child, I hold my breath and lose the grin. "Sorry. Please do."

"Whaddya, say we give *The Case of the Dismembered Finger*, to the police? Seems to me, Howie stole some trees, and perhaps he got in deeper than he should've."

Glad we're still speaking about Matteo and not my pregnancy, my shoulders relax, and my lungs let out my held breath. "There's no crime, so they won't do anything, anyhow. Dammit, we'll never get our money back."

"Don't you think you ought to be focusin' on things a mite more important... like say, a certain fundraiser?" His gaze flicks off the road.

As his eyes narrow, my stomach churns and I clunk the back of my head on the seat. “What do you think of moving to Sicily? I’m sure Uncle Vinny could find us work.”

“Sure thing, sugar. You could get a few lessons from Frankie, and I’ll be set for life.” Shaking his head, he smirks. “Seriously, if you need some help getting donors, I could go door to door and offer my body to the blue-haired ladies.”

We’ve been married long enough to know he’s using humor to get me to focus on something I am trying hard to avoid. “You’re too willing. No, I got this. St. Thomas’ fund raising needs to enter this century. They’re using the same techniques from when my grandmother was a kid. If I create a Go-Fund-Me page and a marketing campaign, I’m certain I can exceed their expectations.”

## Chapter 8

### Suds

On Tuesday morning, my shoulder aches less and when I stretch, there's no shooting pain. My sleep alarm stayed silent throughout the night, so the way I figure it, my PTSD setback was a temporary blip on my well-being radar.

Whistling, I open the daycare door and help my son take off his jacket. When he spies one of his best buds, a girl with dark braids, he gives me a quick hug and races after her.

While I'm signing out, the office lady delivers me a piece of yellow-lined paper. "As requested, these are the school's volunteers and phone numbers."

"Thank you, kindly." I picture poor Samantha's brain exploding when she attempts to decipher the illegible hen scratching.

Because I prefer my wife's head intact, I squint at the Egyptian hieroglyphs, and frown. "Don't suppose y'all have a typed version? Because my eye was damaged in Afghanistan, I can't see as well as I used to, sorry."

The woman takes the list back and about fifteen minutes later, I walk away with a clean copy. With the sun shining and the weather in the sixties, I meander to our PI office. After I stop for two cups of joe, I trot up the stairs and plop in the chair next to my partner.

"What's new, Scooby-doo?"

Rolling closer to the glass conference room table, Sam smirks, and turns her laptop so I can view the screen." Here's a street cam video of Matteo unloading the trees."

Her obsession with getting our money back is worrisome, but to say so, will only make matters worse. "Babe, ain't we got any payin' customers we ought to be investigatin'?"

Ignoring my question, the dogged ex-FBI analyst zooms in on block letters painted on one side of a yellow, U-Haul-sized vehicle, LARRY'S TRUCKING.

Samantha points to a six-foot man in a plaid shirt tossing cut pines out the back door. "Betcha he knows where Howie's at, wouldn't you agree, Suds?"

"Knowing your neighborhood, he won't talk." This should be the end of the conversation, but my danger magnet simply smiles, picks up her phone, and hits speed dial.

"Hey Uncle Vinny. Were I to send you a guy's name and number, could you text him and say I'm on the level?" For my benefit, she presses the screen's green speaker icon and places the electronic device between us.

"What's in it for me?" If nothing else, the mobster is consistent.

Light brown brows raised, she crosses her fingers. "A favor for your favorite niece?"

"How about tit for tat?" His chuckle sends a chill down my spine, but my brave spouse doesn't flinch.

"Considering you're the one who recommended we purchase a tree from a certain lot, I'd say you owe me, but, because you're *famiglia*, I'll snag you a tin of Rose's fresh-baked cookies."

"Stop by later. We'll talk. Bring your son, but not your *marito bastardo*."

"Her bastard husband is sitting right hear and can hear you, Vincent." Reaching over, I hang up her phone and shoot my perfected stink-eye at my wife. "Why do you insist on dealing with this *goombah*?"

"It's efficient." The mother of my child shrugs, causing my fists to clench and my ears to start ringing.

"Sam, he's a mob boss." Good mood ruined, I roll my eyes, and wonder how in God's name to rein in my unbridled filly.

Before I can say whoa-now, her lips cover mine in such a heated kiss, my blood runs south of my navel and my cock crams against my fly.

After we come up for air, the little minx smiles. “Let’s not argue. Vincent will insist Larry talk to us and that’s all that matters.”

Sam thinks she’s won this here argument, but she is dead wrong. “If we want another baby, we got to have a few rules. Not bein’ indebted to a gangster is number one on my long-term goals.”

Something I said must’ve hit a nerve because her cheeks redden, and she remains unusually quiet during the drive to Larry’s. As she sends a text, I park behind his yellow truck. Soon, a six-foot-two skinhead exits his ten-story apartment complex. When I spot the prison tats on his knuckles, I hiss, and turn the key.

The SUV’s not even in drive before Sam jumps out, approaches the felon, and waves. “Thanks for seeing me.”

Leaning against the wall on the top step, he crosses his arms and lowers his lids half-way. “Make it quick, I’m a busy man.”

“You drop deez trees off for Howie?” While my wife climbs the stairs and shoves her phone under his broken nose, I grab my gun and follow.

Eyes on me, he reaches behind his back, no doubt for a weapon tucked in his waistband. “Yeah. Cash. One-time transaction. No biggie. What’s it to ya?”

In a scary resemblance to her Uncle Vinny, Sam’s eyes narrow and her accent thickens. “So, you seen him recently or wot?”

“No, but got no reason to, either. Like I said, it was a onetime deal.” Glancing at me, then up and down the street, the guy shuffles his feet, and picks his nose.

As Sam gathers her thoughts, I barge into the silence. “Where were the trees stored?”



He types into her phone, hands it back, then waits for her to nod before asking, “We good?”

“Yeah, T’anks.” Because she turns, she can’t see the worry etched on his face, but I do and can’t help but wonder why.

“You be sure and tell Vinny I helped you out.” At the threatening tone, my crazy spouse flips four insulting fingers under her chin.

“Whatever.”

“Bitch.” He spits on the ground, curses under his breath, and as he disappears inside the building, I let go of my weapon.

With fists clenched, I walk her back to the SUV, open the passenger side door, and as I slam it shut, she smiles up at me.

“We’ve got just enough time to check out the address before we need to pick up Mikey.” She has no clue the guy had come close to shooting her.

My spidey senses tingle like mad. “Phone your dad for backup or I’ll call Slate. Hell, you can even ask one of your uncle’s goons to meet us there. We’re not goin’ in alone.”

“Maybe I’m old enough to remember someone saying we should ask my uncle for less favors, yes?” Her brows lift and as she tries to read my face, I reach for my phone.

“You’re right. I’ll ring Patten right now.”

Her hands cover mine. “Is this because of your PTSD? We’re simply searching for a lowlife who stole some trees. Seriously, this is not dangerous, Suds.”

“Sweetheart, fuck the decor. We can buy another damn shrubbery, It’s not worth the risk.” *I know I’m not making any sense but sometimes, a man has got to put his foot down.*

“Fine, you tell Mikey how Santa can’t afford Roger Robot.” The way she juts out her chin means no sex tonight if I don’t agree.

“Ah, hell.” Maybe she’s right and I *am* overreacting.

However, my unease increases as I park on the vacant street. The hi-tech surveillance on the nearby warehouse makes it worse.

“Who owns this building?” Heart pounding, I lift out of my seat and tug the door handle, while Sam shrugs.

“Sorry, I thought I said. It belongs to Vinny’s LLC, but don’t worry, we’re not going inside.”

*Fuck. I should’ve guessed.* Weapon out, I follow her to a fenced-off area next to a loading dock. When we get close, she pulls a lockpick from her purse. After a few minutes, the padlock clicks and the hinge swings open.

While she studies a few remaining trees, I place my palms on the cement platform and jump up. Leaning over, I pull up on the accordion door’s handle and almost fall on my ass when it lifts halfway. About to straighten, a fresh bullet hole catches my eye, so I squat, grab my boot knife, and dig out the slug. As I’m stuffing it in my pocket, feet shuffle inside the building and a pistol clicks.

*Fuck.* “Babe. To the car. Now.” I dive on my wife, roll, and covering her fully, aim toward the opening.

## Chapter 9

Sam

On my stomach, crushed under Suds' heavy body, I free my arm, and pocket a small silver tag near my nose. The clue safely stashed, I squirm to unholster my weapon. Once my finger finds the trigger, I aim my pistol at the half-open warehouse door.

“Did you see the shooter?”

Suds grunts. “No. Get to the SUV. I'll provide cover. One, two... Go!”

The second he rolls off, I dash to the car while he discharges his revolver in the direction of the gunfire.

“Now you.” Heart thumping, I hide behind the driver's side door and fire repeatedly, until he makes it to the passenger seat.

Now behind the wheel, adrenaline races through my veins. I stomp down on the gas pedal and glance in the rear-view mirror. Not until I'm certain no one's following, do I pull over and call nine-one-one. My father's dark sedan is one of the first to arrive on scene and surprised to see him respond to a call, I run toward the rolled down window.

“Dad? What're you doing here?”

“The dispatcher said my daughter's in trouble again. Are you alright?” He glares out at my spouse who glowers back.

Like I would for Chloe and Catrina, I step between the two men to keep them from biting each other. “Relax. We're fine.”

“God damn it, Samantha, what the fuck? You know better than to snoop around Vinny's warehouse.” It's never a good sign when my old man rolls his eyes and slaps his hand to his forehead, so I try to make light of the situation.

“I wasn’t snooping, per se. Sebastian and I were... shopping for a Christmas tree.”

“And following up on a lead.” Trying to help, my husband pipes up but my dad ignores both of us.

With each word spoken, he pokes the tip of my nose. “Only you could attract trouble buying a damned holiday shrubbery.”

The accusation may be true, but unwarranted. “We’re researching a cutoff middle finger.”

“So what? You wanted to give it back?” He takes out his phone, glances down, then turns to Suds. “Do not let her move from that spot. I’ll be right back after I check out this cluster-fuck.”

Once he returns from speaking to the beat cops, I cross my arms and pout. “Don’t you want to learn more about our case?”

“Was anyone murdered?” Brows raised, he juts out his square chin.

“Possibly...” *At this point, it’d be in my best interest to play my cards closer to the vest.*

Shaking his head, my police chief father scowls back at my husband. “My daughter’d be working for the FBI behind a desk where she belongs, if it weren’t for you, *gabeesh?*”

“Yes sir, I understand completely.” My partner may want to keep the family peace, but I’m done being nice.

“Dad, just stop it. I’m not a child. *Suds and Sam* is investigating a possible missing person’s case.”

“You don’t say? Were any reports filed?” His fierce glare makes me cringe, but I don’t back down.

“Not yet. Clearly, we’re on to something.” At my admission, his face reddens to a shade deeper than Santa’s hat.

“Well, most people don’t shoot other people over fucking Christmas trees.”

“Everyone *knows* that, jeez.” Following on his heels, I realize Vincent’s going to be pissed how someone, namely me, drew attention to his freakin’ warehouse.

Once Suds make a U-turn, we tail my dad, and arrive back at the scene of the shooting.

“All clear.” NYPD’s Emergency Response Team exits the building, and as the leader speaks with my father, a black Escalade with tinted windows pulls to the curb.

A five-foot fortyish man in a dark suit jumps out and flashes his FBI badge. “Special Agent Griner, here. The Bureau is taking charge, chief. We need everyone to go.”

My dad sputters, steps aside to make a call to his superiors and returns with his face now violet. “Clear out. Let the FBI have at it.”

“Hey, I’m a Fed,” I flash my old ID and the jerk laughs in my face.

“Nice try. Go back to finding husbands with their dicks stuck in the wrong hole. Our team of professionals are here to do real work.”

My fists tighten, and as I swing, my Navy SEAL grabs my arm mid-air. “Let it go, Sugar Ray.”

“Fucking douchebag.” Behind my back, my fully attached middle finger shoots the arrogant asshole the bird.

# Chapter 10

## Suds

“Y’all want our statements, or can we go?” The situation in the parking lot is deteriorating faster than I can talk, which is saying a whole lot. Either Samantha settles down or she’s going to be arrested.

“And you are?” Special FBI Agent Griner steps into my personal space, but I’ve got several inches on him and twice his width in muscle mass.

If he’s trying to intimidate me, it’s not working. He better not say anything else derogatory to me or my wife because I know a hundred ways to hurt him, and it would be ruled accidental.

“Sebastian Sutcliff, at your service.” As I hold out my hand, the Fed’s nose wrinkles and he sniffs, reminding me of a weasel.

“Aren’t you the rambler?”

Too bad I can’t flutter my eyelashes. A skill like that would come in mighty handy right about now. “Dunno what you’re referrin’ to but we’re the victims here. If you’re not interested in what happened, I assume we’re free to go.”

Our pissing contest ends when a woman, dressed in a dark suit and sensible shoes steps between us.

Eyes on me, she points to my wife. “Not you, her.”

“Seems to me, you’d want both our eyewitness accounts.” Unwilling to give up on the possibility of topping my world record, I maneuver my wife behind me.

“I’m afraid your reputation precedes you.” Her uppity northeast accent and arrogant countenance grates on my nerves.

She’s also put the kibosh on my fun which leaves me a mite testy. “Can I see your badges? Y’all don’t seem like any

FBI agents I ever met.”

After they trot out their credentials, I snap pics and send them to my friend at the Joint Terrorism Task Force, who texts me right back.

O’Brien: They’re legit.

Dammit. *What the fuck did we step into?* I send him a thumbs up, then cool my heels while my danger magnet relays her account of the incident.

Once she’s done, we’re told not to leave town, and I drive us back to our old neighborhood.

In front of Joey’s place, my partner sighs. “We probably should swing by Petey’s and explain what happened to *il capo di tutti capi*. I’ll run up and grab Mikey. We can get dinner while we’re there.”

My Italian isn’t great so before she hops out the car, I reach across and tap her arm. “Head of all hats?”

Opening the door, she shoots me a grin over her shoulder. “Sorry. Boss of all bosses, Uncle Vinny.”

“You usin’ our kid to soften him up?” *I’m not sure I’m okay with this.*

Standing on the curb, she places her hands on her hips. “You got a better idea?”

“Nah. Let’s get this over with.” Like her, I’m dying to know who shot at us and why the Feds took over the investigation. Not only that, I’m hungry.

Before long, the pizzeria owner wipes his hands on his stained apron and points a thumb toward the freezer. “I’ll take your credit card now. You might be dead by the time your pie comes out of the oven.”

His grin could mean two things. He’s either glad I’m about to end up at the bottom of the river or he’s joking. I can’t be sure.

“Come in. Take a load off.” In a room more suited to Louis XIV, Sam’s uncle waves us to the head of the table where he sits in front of a huge antipasto platter.

Eyes ever-vigilant, I choose a red cushioned chair closest to the exit. Sam, however, walks right up to the old mobster, kisses both his cheeks, and plops Mikey in his lap.

“You wanted to see us?” If you didn’t know, you’d think she didn’t have a worry in the world.

Adjusting his great-nephew on his lap, the gangster smiles indulgently at his niece. “I heard youz had a little trouble at one of my warehouses.”

My partner reaches long, grabs a toothpick and plops a tiny meatball in her mouth. “Who the fuck would have the balls to shoot at *famiglia*? Shameful. Disrespectful, too. How can we be of help?”

His smile sends a shiver down my back but rolls off my partner like water off a duck, or should I say a cooked goose?

While our son bounces on one knee, Vincent hands the boy a small block of cheese. “No one shoots anybody in my neighborhood... at least not wid-out axin’ me first. I tell you what. I’m going to hire youz two to find out how dis happened.”

My first inclination is to jump up and shout, hell no. Instead, self-preservation prevails.

“Sweetheart, I’m not sure we can take on another client at this time.” By raising my brows and clearing my throat, I telepathically transmit my concerns to my wife.

Busy uncurling my son’s fingers from a crystal goblet’s stem, she misses my signal. “Nonsense. We need the money.”

“Honey-pie...” I swear I am going to strangle her when we get home and no judge or jury in their right mind would find me guilty.

Vincent Vitale’s eyes narrow and he puffs his cigar, trying to get it to light. “How about I sweeten the deal? I promise to get your plumbing fixed before Christmas.”



“That would be nice, huh, Sebastian?” My spouse glances over and while it would be lovely to have our toilet fixed, I don’t want to be indebted to the mafioso.

“What about the Chinese Auction, dear?” Before she can answer my question, Vincent snaps his fingers and one of his thugs brings him a briefcase. I expect it to be full of unmarked bills but it’s simply an old-fashioned checkbook.

“I’ll get you started and match every dollar you raise. How’s dat?”

Sam jumps up and hugs him. “*Mille grazie, Zio Vincenzo.*”

*How the fuck am I supposed to compete with The Godfather?* The best I can do is contain the risk. “To be clear, if we take this case, there are no implied future favors of any kind. This is a one-time agreement.”

As I stick out my hand to shake on the deal, he chuckles, and graciously takes what’s offered. “Done and done.”

After tapping some ashes into a glass tray, he blows a smoke ring, then glances at my wife. “I’m beginning to see why you married this chump.”

A few minutes later, alive and no worse for wear, we don our coats and walk back to the SUV. I have the kid on my hip, and she carries the warm pizza box.

“I cannot believe you consented to work for him. A few cases ago, we agreed to keep him at arm’s length.” Because Mikey’s got big ears, I tamp down my ire.

Once she’s strapped him in the car seat, she plops down next to me and pokes my arm. “Don’t deny it, when Vinny mentioned plumbing, your eyes sparkled.”

*Shit.* I stuff my hands in my pocket to retrieve my car keys and a piece of sharp metal hits my fingertips. *Huh?*

As I pull out the round object to study it, my FBI analyst snaps to attention. “What’s that?”

“Almost forgot, I found this slug near my boot and was diggin’ it out of the warehouse floor when the shootin’ began. I’ll ship it to Slate and get it analyzed tomorrow.”

My sweetheart points out all the Christmas lights to Mikey, then leans over to whisper in my ear. “Do you think Vitale just hired us to spy on the Feds?”

“It’s possible, sugar. The water is deep and we’re walkin’ on thin ice.”

# Chapter 11

Sam

Once we've eaten and suffered through the same damn baby dinosaur movie again, we put our sleepy son to bed. After grabbing a couple drinks from our fridge, we open the trap door, and tip-toe downstairs where my three cousins sit in the kitchen.

"How're things with Divorces-R-Us?" Suds reaches his bottle across the round table and clinks it against Joey's.

"Business is bada-boomin'. Mrs. Purcell called. Ho, ho, ho. She found a Tiffany box in her husband's glove compartment. The card was addressed to a woman she never met."

"Perhaps a work acquaintance?" In the PI business, one must try to remain impartial. Besides, it's Christmas. Miracles can happen.

Covering left thumb with right fist, our part-time photographer makes a rude gesture and laughs. "Seriously? The guy's been bangin' his assistant for years. Last year, I took some initiative and got some real juicy images. Want I should show you some?"

He picks up his phone and as he starts to scroll, Mia grabs it from him. "Ewww, no. Gross."

The hot potato gets tossed to Rose, who throws it to me, where it is grabbed by my hubby. "Joey, you know the rules. Upload and delete."

"I wuz showin' you the evidence so's I can be paid." He's so full of shit. My cousin has worked for us for years. The jerk's trying to needle Saint Mia, for shits and giggles.

My older cousin rolls her eyes, clinks her IPA against my Olde Brooklyn Root Beer, and narrows her gaze.

*Uh-oh, here we go.*

“How’s your stomach?” Rose lifts her dark brows and tilts her head. In silent cousin-speak, she’s asking if I’ve told my husband I’m preggo.

No other option available, I add another sin to the list, and start a small war. “Remember the time Joey rubbed poison ivy on your sheets?”

“If memory serves, I was seven.” The one being maligned shoots his hands in the air as if under arrest. “And youz guyz paid me back for weeks.”

Subject successfully changed, I glance over at my male cuz. “Hey. Your dad says hi. Just so’s youz are aware, he hired us.”

“You okay wid dat?” Dark Italian eyes dart to my husband who scowls and picks at his beer bottle label.

“No one shoots at my wife.” My SEAL’s tone turns deadly as he glances up at our street-smart employee.

“And what does Uncle Mike say?” Joey’s right to be concerned about the police but it’s not them he needs to be worried about.

“The Feds took over Dad’s investigation.” Sipping my root beer, I wonder how much he knows.

“Fuck.” After he swallows, Joey walks to the sink, opens the cabinet, and tosses his empty. “My father must be royally pissed.”

“Indeed he is.” My partner grabs my arm, stretches, and fakes a yawn. “Long day y’all. See ya tomorrow.”

Halfway up the stairs, I look back at Rose, and she mouths, “*Tell him.*”

*Jeesh. Enough, already.* Back in our bedroom, I strip, lock up our weapons, and ready the life-saving sleep monitor while Suds brushes his teeth.

Beautifully naked, my stud muffin returns and slides under the covers beside me. “Mmm. Thanks for warmin’ the sheets.”

“Anytime.” My right arm under his neck, I tug his mouth to mine, and as we share a sleepy, tender kiss, his calloused palm wanders down the front of my body.

Parting my knees, he hisses as his fingers slip between my swollen folds. “So damn wet.”

“Always, for you, tough guy.” A small moan escapes me when he slides the side of his hand over my clit.

There, he plays my nub until I’m ready to erupt, but before I can come, he pulls me on top of his chest and caresses my butt cheeks. As our tongues tangle, his deployed cock awaits a call to action. Panting, I place my hands on his pecs, and arch until a nipple slips between his soft lips.

Even a gentle bite causes me to gasp. God, I forgot how pregnancy makes everything much more sensitive. His teeth release and as he sucks, I lift, place him at my core, and lower down to take him all in.

For a while, we relish the intense pleasure, but soon nature takes over. My man bucks up, I press down, and we race to our high. Suddenly, he hits my perfect spot, groans, and swallows my scream as he pistons inside me.

Holy shit, I have no idea what button he pushed, but I can’t stop shuddering. Sebs senses it too and takes his time emptying into me as I collapse on his body.

After a bit, he reaches for his monitor, closes his eyes, and mutters, “You sure you ain’t pregnant?”

Safe and warm, his heartbeat at the same tempo as mine, I inhale and exhale. “It’s too soon to tell for certain, but I’ll buy a test next week.”

“An EMT once told me, them things work faster now.” The pillow absorbs his voice making his mumbling barely discernable.

“Are you worried? Do you not want another baby? ... Suds?”

*Dammit.* He’s sound asleep. Disappointment and relief keep me awake, but eventually exhaustion overwhelms me. At

some point in the night, his monitor goes off, but when I question him, he doesn't remember the dream.

Too soon, my phone alarm bleeps. *Fuck, it's morning.* With my pillow squished around my ears, I groan. "God, I can't believe I told Aunt Marion I'd wash hair today. Maybe I oughta call in sick."

At the mention of the word, sick, Godzilla-sized bile rises out of my sea of stomach acids. "Oops, Gotta pee."

Racing to the bathroom, I run every faucet, and attempt the impossible task of silent puking. After the monster retreats, I open my secret stash of saltines under the sink and nibble until the queasiness subsides.

A quick shower later, I hop in my clothes, ready to take on the world. As I'm trying to convince myself, my hubby lifts his jeans-clad mini-me from the kitchen table.

"I can drop Mikey off today, if you like." After our boy runs off to find his coat, my sexy SEAL pulls me to his body, and presses his morning wood to my lower half. "Mmm. You feel good. How about we take a break later, for the-kid-takes-a-nap-sex?"

"We can always try. Miracles do happen." My head in the clouds, thinking of last night's bed play, I check the time and moan. "*Shit-tak-e* mushrooms. I need to go. See you guys later."

Not wanting to deal with the first-floor troll, I race down the back steps and knock over the garbage. Creating more steam than the L-train midwinter, I dash down the sidewalk. Thankfully, at Aunt Marion's, my conscientious cousin has unlocked, so I don't need to wait at the door.

After helping me off with my coat, Rose hands me a cup of hot chocolate. "Global warming..."

"... is causing us to freeze to death?" Usually, I'm all about the science, but it's difficult with my fingers about to fall off.

"The ocean currents are all fucked up because there's too much fresh water from the melting poles." She opens the dryer

and starts folding the small cotton cloths.

While I dole them out to each station, I walk past the cash register. Beside it sits a wide-mouth jar marked ‘donations to St. Thomas’ with a few one-dollar bills stuffed inside. At this rate, Mikey will have his doctorate before we reach our goal.

While I’m considering moving to Canada, Mia arrives with two huge boxes of pastries. Seeing my shock, she answers my unasked question.

“Mom told everyone you were coming in today. You better have some juicy stories to amuse the blue-haired crowd. Otherwise, they may become vicious.”

*Great.* During the morning break, I call the plumber, cross my fingers, and pray to the patron saint of lost causes. “Hey Sal, how’s my plumbing?” *Shit, that didn’t come out right.*

“Sammy, I got good news and bad news. So, I found the parts, but they won’t be here until after New Year’s. Sorry.” Salvatore doesn’t sound the least bit apologetic.

At my wit’s end and not willing to give up, I leave a message with Uncle Vinny. As I’m returning my phone to my purse, I spy a small, unrecognized silver tag.

*Huh. What’s this?*

Ah, now I remember. It was in front of my nose at the warehouse. Research, however, must wait. I’m up to my elbows in shampoo.

Mrs. Gallo closes her eyes as I rinse her thin, short hair. “Why not have a dance-a-thon? The couples will dance until they pass out. It’s a lot of fun.”

“The school hasn’t allowed those since the late forties.” Chuckling and yet horrified, I stop the water, lift her seat, and wrap her head in a towel.

Her eyes grow soft and kind of far off. “Too bad, I planned on asking Mr. Hilliard to be my date.”

“Isn’t he in a wheelchair?” One side of my mouth quirks up as she nods enthusiastically.

“We would’ve won, for sure.”

“I bet next year is the charm.” Patting her hand, I help her to stand and walk her to Mia’s chair.

After more advice of similar quality, I say goodbye and on the way to the office, I stop for a bowl of minestrone where I leave another message for Vincent.

Back at ‘Suds and Sam’s’ PI office, I show my husband the oval, half-inch tag. “I think it’s a tree identifier.”

Soon, I find an article in a small-town flyer and jump up. “Got it! Some Virginia Pine Trees were stolen from a state forest. These must be the ones Howie said fell off a truck.”

Looking over my shoulders, my partner snickers. “You figure some tree-huggers cut off Howie’s finger as payback?”

“Not funny. I for one, am going upstate to snoop around. Are you coming or not?” When I stand, he kisses me senseless and smiles.

“Personally, I think you’re barking up the wrong tree, so to speak, but it sounds like a nice outing for Mikey and a hell of a lot safer than buying another tree around here.”



## Chapter 12

### Suds

She's not driving upstate alone. Knowing her, she would've gone without me, if only to prove some vague notion of right and wrong. So, after picking up Mikey and getting an earful from the school staff about the fundraiser, we dress in layers, and put the kid in the car seat.

Sam suggests we stop at my father-in-law's to pick up an axe, but it hasn't been sharpened since the turn of the century. This means a pitstop at the local hardware store. Soon, we're driving alongside the Hudson River. As we pass over the George Washington Bridge, Mikey's head droops.

When his eyes close, my hand slips to Sam's knee. "Babe, have you taken an at-home test yet?"

Paling, she bites her lower lip. "Ah, I've been kind of busy."

Stuck behind a truck, I glance in the rearview mirror, and change lanes. "Are you worried about my PTSD? Because you don't have to be, I'm fine."

"No, no. That's not it. There simply hasn't been time, and it's too early to know for sure."

*Like hell.* Were this our first rodeo, maybe I wouldn't be so savvy, but a husband soon learns when his wife's body has changed. *Is our relationship in trouble? Does she not want to keep our baby?*

Holy fuck. What am I missing?

Time passes and we talk about everything but the eight-hundred-pound gorilla in the SUV. Too soon, we arrive at the GPS coordinates where a woman in a green ranger jacket greets us. As she directs us to a parking place in a muddy clearing, Mikey wakes, raring to go. Worried he might run off, I snap on his leash, and let him race up the hill.

While we search for the perfect evergreen, Sam chitchats with our guide. “I read you had some Virginia Pines stolen recently.”

The twentyish, dark-haired worker nods and blows into her mittens. “Yes, from the national forest a little west of here. The furs are an endangered species in New York and all well-over six feet tall. It’s such a loss.”

Sam shows her the small metal tag she found at the warehouse. “Do you recognize this number?”

The Gen-Z’s eyes widen, but soon narrow. “How did you come by that?”

“We’re PI’s, researching the theft. Have you ever seen this man?” My partner waves her cell phone under the girl’s nose.

After studying the image for a moment, the brunette shakes her head, no. “Sorry.”

Sam swipes her display screen and tries again. “How about this truck?”

The girl’s eyes widen, then she bobs her head. “Oh yeah, him. Gossip around town says the guy’s a real jerk. The town hired him for summer landscaping and odd jobs.”

At the I-told-you-so-face from my partner, I shrug. So, Larry-the-trucker is a tree thief. I’m not sure how that brings us closer to getting our money back or finding out who shot at us. What it did do, is to get us a clean pine scent which needs to be chopped down. After striking at the base with a couple of hard whacks, I hand Mikey a toy axe.

“Hit it right here, buddy.” Emulating me, he swings, and when it hits, I push the branches to the ground. “Great job, slugger.”

With one final cut, the pine detaches, and as a family, we drag it to the bottom of the hill to pay. Once the treasure is secured to the roof, we buy hot chocolate, eat cinnamon buns, and make our way back home.

Around Suffern, the town where New York meets New Jersey, my phone rings, and Slate sounds through the SUV’s

speakers. “The slug you sent matches one dug out of a murder victim a couple years back. The case remains unsolved. The primary suspect was a guy named Vapes. I’m sending you his deets.”

The line goes dead before I can say thanks.

“That’s weird. Why would this killer be involved with stolen trees?” Sam voices the same concern rattling around in my head.

“Well, I suppose we could go check out his address after we drop off our sweet-smelling evergreen.” Again, my preternatural senses tingle. What do a mobster’s warehouse, the FBI, stolen pines, and a cold case, all have in common?

While I ponder this multi-million-dollar question, we eat dinner, ask Joey to babysit, and drop our prize at home, otherwise known as Santa’s stench-shop.

“Here goes nothin’.” I open my door and immediately regret not buying a gas mask.

Holding my breath, I set the fir inside the stand, and run back outside, gasping for fresh air. “We need to solve this damn case so we can pressure Vincent to deliver on his promise.”

Sam grabs my arm. “No time like the present. Let’s find Vapes.”

## Chapter 13

Sam

“Sebastian, you sure this is the place?” I rub my elbow on the steamed-up, passenger-side window and study the blue-collar neighborhood.

Six-foot inflatable Christmas figures, including Santa, Snoopy, and the Grinch, overwhelm postage-stamp-sized front lawns. Nothing about this Newark neighborhood screams murderer-in-residence, but hey, a former FBI analyst does not judge a romance novel by the sexy guy on the front cover.

“I hear ya, babe, but this is the address Slate sent us.” My partner stops at the curb, frowns at his phone, and after jumping out of our SUV, trots to my side.

My arm in his, he walks me up the cracked front steps and rings the bell several times. Because no one responds, my partner opens the storm door and lifts the brass knocker. On the first rap, hinges creak and the wood swings free.

“Oh shit.” At the scent of death, my jacket sleeve shoots up to cover my nose.

“Fuck it, Sam, step back.” Gun out, mister-machismo pushes me behind his back.

On his heels, I creep by a pendulum grandfather clock who’s incessant tik-tok covers the sound of my labored breathing. In the living room, we pass between a forty-inch monitor and a gold sofa. After walking under an arch, we arrive in the kitchen where Suds points at the stick-on vinyl flooring. Between the sink and the refrigerator, a man lies dead, a dark red circle growing larger as we stare.

Face grim, my partner squats by the body, checks for a pulse, and shakes his head, no. “Call nine-one-one. Tell them the body’s still warm.”

Thinking of the lessons I've learned from Frankie-the-hitman, I point to the man's bloody chest. "Two slugs to the heart at close range. Professional?"

With the words barely out of my mouth, a door slams at the back of the house.

"Fuck, the killer is still here." Sebastian races toward the noise, a shot is fired, and my heart races so badly, I can't push the three numbers.

A few seconds later, he returns, completely unaware that I thought he ate a bullet. "Too dark, I couldn't see a damn thing."

"Jeez, don't ever scare me like that again. Are you even listening?" My arms wrap around his waist, and I hug him until sirens sound in the distance.

Not wanting to be found in close proximity to the deceased, we return to our SUV. By the time the police show up, a thin layer of ice covers our windshield. With sleet pelting our jackets, we get out and show the local cops our PI licenses.

Not happy with our answers, they escort us to the precinct, which is fine with me because by now, I'm fucking freezing.

Both sides of my family agree on one thing. Should you ever find yourself in front of a dead body, demand a lawyer. The primary goal of the police is to find a suspect, beginning with you.

Worried he's going to ramble, I narrow my gaze at my husband. "Not a word without our *consigliere*."

"Yes ma'am." Grinning, he winks, which generally means he's going to do as he damn pleases.

I'm about to give him hell when the same jerk who took over the warehouse investigation, enters the room.

After slapping his wet fedora against his long wool coat, he glowers at me. "I told you to stay clear, but I suspect you never listen, do you?"

"Lawyer." My index finger shoots to my husband's lips, and I zap laser-like warnings into his eyes.

Once I'm certain my point hit home, I focus all my attention on Special Agent Stick-Up-His-Ass, resting against the gray wall.

“How about I talk, and you listen?”

“Cliché much?” Leaning back in my chair, I cross my arms and close my eyes. “Go ahead.”

“How about I start with this? Two private investigators are about to be arrested for obstruction of justice.”

At his lame declaration I snort and to my right, Sebastian chuckles. “Excellent try, but you're reaching, dude.”

“Not at all. You stole evidence from my crime scene.” He points at my husband now raising his brows.

“Moi?” As his fucking lashes flutter like a pro, I shrug my shoulders.

“He can't mean me.”

The sneering Fed loosens his tie and raises his voice. “You think this is funny? I could take your kid away and make your life a living hell.”

Fists clenched, Suds starts to rise until I place my hand on his knee. “Shush. Winter is coming.”

The *Game of Thrones* reference is lost on the Fed, but my husband understands and says no more. Paybacks are a bitch.

Soon, *the something bad about to happen* walks into our interrogation room. Luckily, Ms. Ursula Brownsberry is on our side. The thirtyish Mary Poppins wears an expensive black suit, totes a Gucci leather bag in her left arm, and an umbrella under her right.

As she sits with impeccable posture, we brief her on the case, and when we're finished, she shares a tight smile. “If I rap my fingers on the table, you will stop talking. The chief and I made a small bet which I expect to win. When I do, it will be deducted from my bill.”

Ready to beat his world's record, my addict salivates. “How long should I talk for?”

“I bet that Griner will give up and send you home in less than an hour.” The lawyer’s perfectly shaped brows arch up.

While my hubby’s balloon may be busted. I, for one, am happy not to spend the entire night in interrogation.

As I give the woman two thumbs up, my disappointed ramblin’ man shakes his head, sighs heavily, and juts out his chin. “Never let it be said Sebastian Sutcliff backed down from a challenge.”

“Excellent.” Rising, her stiletto heels click on the linoleum and at the door, she shouts out, “We’re ready to cooperate.”

“About time.” Griner enters, shoots us a superior look, and as he turns on the recorder, Suds prepares for battle by making sad, puppy-dog eyes.

Ignoring my husband, the interrogator scoots forward. “Let’s start with an easy question. Why kill Mr. Stanley Vaporella?”

*Mr. Stanley Steamer?* At the ridiculous fake Italian surname, I turn my head toward the wall, and snicker through my nose.

Hand to his mouth, my husband tamps down his smile and takes a deep breath. “Wahl, it sort of depends on what you mean by kill. Certainly, I didn’t shoot nobody and neither did Sam but are we responsible? Not directly, but what about indirectly? What I mean is, if we hadn’t’ve bought a Christmas tree, would poor Vapes still be alive? That there, is the question we need to address. Now, you’re about to interrupt me, but let me continue if you would. Here’s how it all went down. My wife, me, and our son went for a walk and bought our first real Christmas tree as a family, Now, we had no idea where those fancy firs came from, but judging from the prices, I’m guessin’ they might’ve been stolen. In that there is no proof, you can’t arrest us. We had no specific knowledge of the trees’ origins. Later, we learned they were likely cut down in a National State Forest near Poughkeepsie, which is a federal crime but not ours, mind you.”

“We’ve veered way off topic, Sutcliff.” As Griner wipes sweat from his brow, my husband takes his kicked-dog look up a notch.

“No sir, I have not, since you haven’t given me time to get to the point. Where was I? Goddamn it, I lost my place. Now I’m gonna need to start all over.”

“I believe you were talking about your damn tree.” For an FBI field operative, the man has zero patience.

“Right. Did I mention we found a detached human finger in it? The whole pine tree stunk somethin’ awful which is why my wife is so adamant about gettin’ our money back. This was why we were at the warehouse when somebody shot at us. Now, imagine my surprise when I’m looking for the man who sold us a shrubbery and someone tries to do us in, which pisses me off majorly, let me tell you. It’s bad enough, our holiday decoration is perfumed by dead flesh, but when someone attempts murder, well, that ain’t one bit neighbor-”

“Shut up, and just tell me Sutcliff, how did you end up at Vaporella’s home in Newark?”

“Damn, you are one impatient sonofabitch.” My rambler glances down at our lawyer’s knuckles tapping on the table.

Eyes back on Griner’s fuming face, he frowns. “Huh, I need to confer with my counselor for a moment. Alone, and no listenin’ or it will be inadmissible in court.”

“I’ll wait outside.” Griner sighs, but as he rises, my husband narrows his gaze and points.

“Oh no, ya don’t. We want a safe room, a cup of coffee, and some sandwiches. Pickles would be nice and bring some potato chips. Wait, do you want anything, sugar?”

“They can make me a grilled cheese with sharp mustard and butter.” At the mention of food, my stomach grumbles and hunger pangs remind me I’m with child. “Better make it two.”

The agent heads for the door, and I block his path. Opening my wallet, I hand him a card. “You might want to give Assistant FBI Director Izuki a call and explain to him why my report will be delayed. And please call my dad if



you wouldn't mind? Captain Michael Sutcliff? I believe you've met. Oh yeah, one other person might want to know where we are... Grayson Patten of Patten Securities. We also work for him on occasion."

The man grumbles. "Any other names you'd like to drop?"

"The President?" At my dismal attempt to flutter my lashes, the short, bald man tilts his head.

"What's wrong? You got something in your eye?"

*Dammit. Where's a baseball bat when you need it?*

## Chapter 14

### Suds

Griner walks us down a gray cinderblock hall to a conference room, big enough for one table and four folding chairs.

Once we sit, Ursula sighs, glances at her phone, and taps her toe. “You neglected to mention you stole evidence from an active crime scene.”

“That’s because I didn’t. The shooting started as I was diggin’ out the slug. Then, the FBI told us to vacate the premises, so we did. To tell the truth, I forgot all about it until much later.” While I speak, I can’t help but wonder. Did finding the bullet trigger everything that came after?

“Is there anything else I should know?” Our counselor’s tone suggests she thinks we’re holding back.

Shrugging, my wife shakes her head, no, and looks to me, but as far as I can recall, I haven’t left anything out. “Ma’am, as I explained before, we gave the bullet to Patten Securities, who mentioned it might’ve been associated with a cold case. Seein’ how we are private investigators, that’s what we were doin’ when we found the body.”

“Understood.” Standing, Ursula raps sharply on the door. “My client is ready to explain how they found Mr. Vaporella’s place of residence.”

At Samantha’s snicker, I raise my brows in a question, and she pulls my ear to her mouth. “Stanley Steamer? It’s a totally fake name.”

Eyes merry, sharing our private joke, we walk back to the first room. Sam ignores the coffee but digs into her grilled cheese. The only other time my wife said no to caffeine was when she was expecting Mikey. My heart soars but I also

question why she hasn't shared the news. Did the doctor say something was wrong, and she didn't want to upset me?

With yet another reason to end this farce, I speak at three times my normal speed. "So, we bought a tree. Did I mention it had a dismembered finger in it? Lordy, I tried to give the odorific digit to the police, but they didn't want it. Like me, they figured some poor slob lopped it off while cutting the trunk. Regardless, my wife here wanted her money back, on account of the stench, so we went looking for Howie Matteo, the seller. Mr. Matteo cannot be located, or so we've been told. His wife don't miss him and says he's probably in hiding which is why we had to keep searching and ended up at the warehouse. While we was lookin' around, I saw this spent ammunition in the floor and dug it out. Now, before you ask me why I didn't give it to the FBI, y'all demanded we leave the premises immediately, which, bein' law abidin' citizens and not wantin' to lose our PI licenses, we did."

Griner pops a pink antacid into his mouth. "The bullet, Mr. Sutcliff? Where is it?"

"I jes' told you. I removed it from the warehouse." Crossing my arms, and jutting out my chin, I bite down on my tongue. Not-rambling is a whole lot harder than I thought it would be.

Veins pulse on the Fed's forehead. "It's my evidence and I want it back."

"No sir, it ain't." Placing my palms on the tabletop, I stand, and lean across the table.

He copies me. "Are you saying it wasn't a crime to shoot at you?"

Inhaling his strawberry stomach soother, I narrow my gaze. "Yes sir, now that's a crime, but I retrieved the metal afore they started shooting. For all I know, someone could've been using the door as target practice, and missed."

"Do not try to play me, Sutcliff." The short, bald man froths at the mouth.

Stepping back, I turn to my lawyer. “Ms. Brownsberry, I am being one hundred percent accurate and forthright, am I not?”

She nods. “Yes, you are. Special Agent Griner, please refrain from shouting at my client. Do you wish to ask him any more questions?”

“Yes. How did the slug lead you to the dead man?” Because of his disrespect, I’m feelin’ a mite passive aggressive.

“I’m so sorry for over-reacting. My wife, here, is a delicate flower and she don’t take well to hysterics.”

Instantly, Sam chokes on her sandwich, so I lean over and pat her on the back. “Sorry if he upset you, sugar-plum.”

Brows high, her eyes water from holding back laughter and as they drip more, I dab my bandanna to the crinkled corners. “Now, now, honey-kins. We’ll be done in a minute.”

Using my cloth to hide her smirk, she swivels to the wall, and buries her face in her hands. To anyone else, the shuddering would indicate sobbing, but I know better.

Her laughter almost cracks me up, but during my military years, I learned to keep a straight face or end up in the brig. “Now, about the bullet I dug out of the wall which we all agree was legally obtained. I sent it to Patten Securities, so they could find my tree salesman because, as you may recall, my wife wanted her one-hundred-fifty dollars back. It’s a whole lot of money when you think about it. You only set the bush up and take it down a few weeks later and it ain’t no good for nothin’ else. I’ve been rootin’ for a fake one, but our house is newly bought, and Sam wanted to keep it real. Still, it don’t matter anymore because we can’t enjoy Christmas in our own house on account of the plumbing which has some kind of broken trap in the sewer line and parts are unavailable due to supply problems but for sure, by New Year’s-”

“Enough! You can go.” Griner plops down in his chair and wipes his brow. “Your counselor can send a succinct, concise, *written* statement in the morning.”

Our triumphant lawyer glances down at her timepiece, smiles, and brushes nonexistent wrinkles out of her dark slacks as she stands. “Excellent. We’ll be in touch.”

On our way out, the precinct captain discreetly passes her a wad of bills and shakes my hand. “You, my man, are a true master.”

“Thank you kindly, and for the food, as well.” Glad to be going home, my arm slips around my beautiful spouse’s waist.

As she finishes zipping up her jacket, she frowns for a moment, and taps a passing female FBI agent on the shoulder. “Can I ask why you’re so interested in the bullet?”

Griner races down the hall, pushes his subordinate aside, and butts in. “No, you cannot. Keep your damn noses out of it.”

“If we don’t know what *it* is, how the hell can we stay clear?” Sam’s tone tells me she is fed up, so to speak, but getting upset won’t help our case.

“C’mon babe, we had best leave before he arrests you.” Removing her tasseled pink hat out of her pocket, I yank it down to cover her eyes.

Once she tugs up on the soft yarn, she catches my gaze, and glares. “Whatever for?”

“Punching him in the face.” Gently, I uncurl five fisted fingers and kiss them one at a time.

After we reach the door, the fire’s out but she’s still simmering. “It’s not right. Someone tried to kill us.”

“Twice, to be precise.” Despite my head bobbing in agreement, she stabs her index finger at my chest.

“Exactly. God, I hate being left in the dark. They should tell us what’s going on, or provide us with security, right?” Sam’s eyes meet mine and as I tweak her nose, I smile.

“Bodyguard, at your service, ma’am.”

Finally, she surrenders her anger, and her lips tilt up, too. “Fine, but I’m billing the FBI at twice your hourly rate.”

“I like how you think, missy.” My mouth sweeps across hers, and my cock twitches with visions of my sugarplum bouncing on my bed.

Soon after, we say our goodbyes, and an officer drops us off at our car. Before I turn the key in the ignition, I take her hand. “You seemed a mite emotional tonight?”

“No, I was the epitome of calm.” Her voice cracks, her nose turns red, and as her lower lip quivers, I lean over the cupholder and kiss it.

“Sweetheart, how about we stop at the drugstore on the way home?” With my thumb and index fingers pinching her chin, her wet lashes lift, and her gaze meets mine.

“Y-you’ll make me stop working the case, but you need me. You haven’t been sleeping well. What if you become distracted? What if you’re killed, and our house stinks like dead rat forever? We can’t be pregnant.” The small sob, so unlike her, breaks my heart.

“Ah babe. Don’t cry.” I tug her across the middle and into my lap.

As her hands slip behind my neck, a few tears escape and drip down her cheeks. “This is all my fault because I’m a fucking danger magnet.”

Cupping her face, I kiss the saltiness away, then capture her gaze. “However much I like hearing you admit it, I can’t fathom how you bein’ a card-carryin’ member of the DM society got us pregnant.”

Her brown eyes roll upwards. “You don’t understand. I had a couple of days where I forgot to take my birth control pills. Yes, I knew we should’ve used a condom but whenever you pull out your thick, beautiful dong, my brain turns to mush.”

I’ll be damned, if that ain’t the nicest thing a wife can say to her husband. I’m so in love, I kiss her with all the passion I can muster until we need to pause for air.

“Sugar, I couldn’t be no happier and regardin’ my bad dreams, I’m seeing the Patten shrink in the morning. We can do this.”

“Promise you won’t take me off from this case?”  
Something more than having a baby is bothering her, but we’ll address her fears when she’s not so tired.

Right now, she needs to calm down and take a long nap. Thinking of her ripe with child, my hand cups her tummy. “How about we agree that you will research only. No bringin’ your belly to a gunfight. We should wait until he or she is at least five or six.”

Her fingers intertwine with mine. “Agreed. Tough guy, I love you so much.”

“Love you, too, babe. How about we head back to Bensonhurst?”

My wife falls asleep straight away, and by the time I pull off the highway, delivery trucks clog the side streets. A couple hours of shuteye later, I’m back on my feet. Sam showers, I ready Mikey for school, then hold his small hand as he tackles the stairs. At the bottom, I knock on Joey’s door, clear my throat, and wait for his eyes to lift before doling out my command.

“I need you to hire a few guys to watch Marion’s today.”

Dark brows crease over his narrowed gaze, and his mouth curves down. “Who’d you piss off now?”

“Not sure, but go ahead, clear it with your father. He’s our new client.” At my admission, he relaxes back in his chair and chuckles.

“Damn, bro, you must be desperate.”

“Freakin’ do it, okay?” *God, I’m too tired for his lip.*

The asshole salutes. “Sure t’ing, boss. I’ll be there as soon as I drop my kid off.”

“I’m taking Mikey. If Kim’s ready, she can walk with us.” Listening in, my niece skips into the kitchen and twirls her St. Thomas’ plaid jumper.

“Hi, Uncle Sudsy. Let’s go.” How Joey ever created such a cutie-pie defies all logic.

As she races out the door, her dad shouts, “Stay clear of the office lady. She swears Sam is going to single-handedly close the school.”

“Thanks for the heads up.” After leaving the kids off, I take the subway to the city, and hop off at Columbus Circle.

Nothing else can cheer a body up like Fifth Avenue in December. When I arrive at Slate’s office, I’m humming Christmas carols, cheerful as fuck, fully prepared to have my head shrunk.

Our Patten boss waves at me as I pass his office. “Ready to go back on the payroll?”

“Primed and pumped, brother.” After I shoot him two thumbs up, he points me down the hall.

“Conference room three.” Following his directions, I meander to a small room where a familiar female form stands at the window, staring down at the street.

The woman turns, and I gasp. “Blake?”

Dr. Smythe, my good friend Jack’s wife, smiles. “Sebastian. So nice to see you.”

Flabbergasted, I plop down on an office chair. “I didn’t know you worked for Patten.”

“Only for his special clients.” The gorgeous blond sits across from me, folds her hands in her lap, and waits for me to say something first.

I shoot her a magic wink. “Shit. It’s not the first time I got shot. It’s no big deal. We done?”

A purse of her lips and a slight tilt of the head tells me she’s not buyin’ what I’m sellin’. “Your wife told Jack the nightmares are back. She asked for me to come.”

*Fuck.* My temper flares. Some things are between a man and his wife. Me and Samantha are gonna have a serious talk after I come home.

“Are you angry?” Leaning forward, the psychiatrist places her elbows on her knees, and tries to read me.



“Of course, I am. I have PTSD and have been dealing with the symptoms for years. I got me a monitor and I got me a good life. Forgive me if I don’t want to delve into all the bad crap which happened years ago.” I have no idea where those thoughts came from, but I’m not apologizing. She’s the one who’s butting in.

“We can talk about whatever you want to.” She says it so damn nicely, but I know how this goes.

“No offense, but this is the kind of shit shrinks pull. You’ll twist my words to fit your agenda.” I scowl and have a kind of eureka moment.

*I am going to retain the upper hand and bring out my biggest, baddest weapon. The rambler.* “Fine. You and me will have a chit-chat and when I’m done, you will tell Slate I am not fucked up in the head so I can go back to work.”

“Suds. I am not the enemy. Lucky and I still talk all the time.”

“He is a basket case. I am not.” When my arms cross my chest, her brows raise, and she sits back.

“Wow. I thought you guys were friends.”

*Dammit. I didn’t mean it to come out that way.* “What I meant to say is I have never considered suicide.” *Not since I met my wife.*

“Okay. How about you tell me how you got shot? That’s why I’m here. To help.” Her smile appears honest, and I should cut her some slack. After all, she did save Lucky’s life, but I can’t help the way I feel about shrinks, even the nice ones.

Closing my eyes, I recall the morning at our nation’s capital. “The job wasn’t anything out of the ordinary. I was hired to guard a high school kid. He’d survived a mass shooting and because of some podcast, he was getting death threats. On this day, he joined a bunch of other Gen-Zers to protest guns. They believe they got the right to go to school without worryin’ about bein’ shot to death. My job was to protect them while they exercised their vocal cords.”

Standing, I walk over to the water cooler and wet my parched throat. After I sit back down, I recall the pivotal moment. “I knew trouble was a-comin’ when some middle-aged, armed militia-wannabees headed toward my demonstrators. I told the one with the dead look in his eyes to drop his damn firearm. Instead, he raised it and took aim at me. I shot him first.”

“Do you feel bad about it?” Blake married a military man and I sense her question is real, and not just shrink-speak.

Before I answer, I ask, “Ever view pics of what an automatic weapon can do at close range?”

“Not really.” Eyes on me, well-manicured nails rest on the arm of her chair.

I return her steady gaze with one of my own. “Wahl then, you probably won’t understand. I have no remorse. I did the right thing.”

Her face holds no judgement and after a bit, her fingers tap the wood. “Generally, when PTSD resurfaces, something triggers the past. Do you know what started this new episode?”

In my mind’s eye, the gunman’s face appears as clearly as it did at the scene. “The terrorist had the same damn lack of emotion as the woman in Afghanistan.”

Blake nods. Because of many hours spent with my pal, Lochlan, she knows the story which ended my navy career better than anyone. “You’re referring to the girl who blew herself up.”

“Yeah, her.” Us jawing about the bomber doesn’t change a thing. Good men died. Lucky and I survived. In war, that’s how shit goes down.

After a long bit of silence, I blurt out what’s been bugging me. “Sam’s pregnant again, but what kind of world we livin’ in, doc? There’s so much hate on our planet, I fear our race’s very existence is on the line.”

“You’re scared.” If anyone else stated such a thing, I would’ve denied it to my dying day, but she’s spot on.

“Damn straight, but not for me, for them. My job as a father is to make sure they survive and every day, another random shooting occurs. Hell, at this point, every parent should be terrified.”

She smiles but it's the sad kind and her voice goes soft. “Suds, you're right. You simply do your best and keep the faith.”

I can't believe I told her my deepest fear. “Shit. Y'all gonna tell Slate I'm a certifiable nutcase?”

## Chapter 15

Sam

Running on empty, I manage to roll out of bed and make my way to Aunt Marion's salon. The job of hair washer requires almost no brain cells which is quite convenient. Having stayed up most of the night, my synapses are napping.

Around mid-morning, Mrs. Delphino, her short curls in foil, glances up from her People magazine. "Didn't you hear, St. Thomas' fund raiser was cancelled?"

"No, I assure you, it's still on." My eyes want to roll, but I've done it so many times today, I'm afraid they'll become stuck, leaving me cross-eyed forever. My nonna has assured me it's not a myth and being over ninety, I believe her.

Mrs. Alice Grundy, her head in the sink below me, lifts her lids. "Aren't you in charge of the event, dear?"

"Yes, would you like to donate?" My heart races. According to her daughter, the widow inherited a fortune when her last husband died. Maybe God has finally answered my prayers.

"Perhaps I have a couple quarters in the bottom of my purse. Go ahead and take them."

*Seriously?* "Thank you." While I'm adding her fifty cents to my envelope, another woman turns off her dryer.

"So, how much have you collected for the Chinese Auction?"

Mia stops snipping pink tips off an ancient customer's head. "Not sure it's politically correct to label it Chinese anymore, wouldn't you say, cuz?"

"How's anyone going to know what it is?" The wet-haired woman at my station has a point.

Rose offers her opinion. “How about an Asian-American auction?”

“Oh, for... let’s call it a pancake breakfast raffle and be done with it. Can anyone here donate a gift or not?” Lack of sleep and puking before breakfast can cause some women to be bitchy. Luckily, I’m not one of them.

Mia’s client raises her hand. “How about a bicentennial ironing board? I won it in nineteen-seventy-six, but the package has never been opened.”

“Sure. We’ll take it. Anyone else?” My brows slant up at the seven or so blue-haired matrons in the salon.

“Would you like my Indian head penny? I imagine it’s probably worth something.” Mrs. Grundy is sweet, but a few hundred-thousand would be more helpful.

Sighing, I give up. “No, you keep the coin for your great-grandkids.”

The rest of the morning is equally fruitful. I receive donations of roller skates in the original box, two matchbook trucks missing wheels, and a chipped depression-era saltshaker. At this rate, I won’t have to worry about a plumber, because I’ll be run out of the neighborhood before Christmas Day.

Most often, everyone wants to be regaled by my new cases, but I insist they donate first. Exciting stories don’t come free. After passing the hat, I describe the case of the dismembered finger. They take a vote and decide I should return to the warehouse, although I explained the Feds circled the building in yellow crime-scene tape.

An octogenarian with purplish-hued hair taps me from under the dryer. “Go arrest those motherfuckers. Show them they can’t mess around in our neighborhood.”

“All right, Mrs. D’Angelo. You got it.”

Mrs. Rossi chews on a pastry and serves herself another coffee. “This sounds so dangerous, dear. Are you sure you want to be a private detective?”

“Yes. Who else would protect my hubby from all those divorcees?”

Giggling, Old Alice, having paid at the register, drops two more quarters in my jar, and pats my hand. “Having a hunk for a spouse is a terrible cross to bear. That’s why I married my Dominic. He was ugly as the day was long, God rest his soul.”

While Rose and Mia snicker in the other room, I can’t help it. I roll my eyes. Thankfully, they return to the center.

During my break, I have an idea. Since Uncle Vinny is footing the bill, I can afford to use the Jason application. It’s the same artificial intelligence used by New York City, the Feds, and others with enough money to pay the exorbitant fees.

After I push the button, a male meme in his twenties with thick glasses peers out at me. “Good morning, Samantha. How can I assist you today?”

Sending him Howie and Stanley’s driver’s licenses, I inquire, “Can you tell me what these two men have in common?”

After a few minutes, the meme man shakes his head. “I’m sorry but I find no intersections.”

“Damn it.” Hanging up on another dead end, I walk to St. Thomas’ to pick up my son.

With nothing else to lose, I call Dr. Jenna Jones, the famous AI’s creator. We exchange pleasantries for a while before I explain my dilemma. “So, I’m certain these two guys have something to do with each other, but Jason couldn’t find a thing. Can you help?”

The brilliant programmer doesn’t respond immediately, and at first, I’m sure she’s going to refuse.

Then, she heaves a deep sigh. “Send me everything you have, and I’ll see what I can do, but I need a favor in return.”

“Of course.” *How bad could it be?* The woman is a b’zillionaire. She probably wants me to hide her husband’s

Christmas present in my garage or some other equally easy task.

As she starts explaining her needs, I realize I can't say no, and if I say yes, my husband will probably have me committed.

"...so you see my problem. The self-defense school is being renovated and for some reason, all the plumbing supplies are on backorder. Colin needs a large room to hold their annual holiday meet and greet. The event is their biggest fund raiser. Do you think you might be able to find us a venue?"

*Holy shit, no way.* "Sure. No problem. How soon do you need it?" In my defense, I had no sleep last night and because of it, am probably suffering from delusional pregnancy syndrome.

"About two weeks from now. We simply require a gymnasium and a decent-sized parking lot."

"Yup, I can find something, I'm sure."

*Suds is going to kill me. If her AI program can't find a location, how the hell can I?* After saying our goodbyes, I turn the corner and approach my son's school.

*Oh my God, no.* As I count over a dozen patrol cars, my only thought is every parent's nightmare, a mass shooting. As I start to run, a dark sedan pulls to the curb and my dad rolls down the window. At the pity on his face, my stomach flip-flops. Something horrible has happened.

My heart thumps in my ears as I pray. *Please God, let my son be spared.* "Daddy, what's going on?"

"Someone took Mikey."

## Chapter 16

### Suds

After waving goodbye to Blake, my phone rings. I can't wait to tell Sam I've been cleared for work and quickly swipe the screen. However, when I put the phone to my ear, my good mood fades.

What the fuck? I can't understand her through the sobbing, but I know it's bad. "Calm down, sugar. Tell me what happened."

"A gunman took Mikey." Odd, how four words can change your life in an instant.

"When?" My dormant SEAL awakens.

"A few minutes ago." As Sam's crying slows, ice-cold resolve courses through my veins. I race down the hall and at Slate's desk, press the speaker icon.

"Was our son hurt?" My grim gaze shoots to my friend, who grasps the situation scarily fast, nods, and snatches a pistol from a drawer.

One deep breath later, Sam answers. "Not that anyone saw. A man came into the school, grabbed our son, and just disappeared."

"Let's go. I'm driving." Coat in hand, the Patten boss stops for comm units, dashes to the elevator, and barks orders to a new guy at the desk.

As I push the down button, a thought comes to mind. "Sam, check the school's video footage. Send it to me."

"Their system is ancient. Video tape. The police are rewinding it as we speak. Oh my God. What if something happened to him?" She's not holding up well and if we're going to survive this, she needs to stay strong.



Despite sharing her fear, my voice remains low and steady. “Don’t think that way. Hang tight babe. The team *will* bring him back.”

Hyperaware, in combat mode, I exit the descending cage in the basement, and follow Slate to an idling SUV near the street.

A man in overalls jumps out of the state-of-the-art, bullet-proof vehicle and stands at attention by the driver’s side door. “Ready to go, sir.”

“I’ve got the wheel.” My friend jumps in and points me to the passenger seat.

“Right.” I can be of more use on the comms and phone.

“Best of luck. We’re all praying for you.” The uniformed attendant slaps me some encouragement on the back and while I do appreciate the sentiment, the Almighty’s often preoccupied. In my experience, He gives every bird his food, but don’t necessarily throw it in the nest.

At this hour, crosstown traffic is heavy, but Slate races around delivery trucks like a pro. Soon, we’re heading south on the FDR, following the GPS to Brooklyn.

After a bit, I realize I never hung up with Sam. “Did the school video catch the kidnapper’s face?”

She still sounds broken. “N-no. He kept his head down.”

*Dammit.* The perp must’ve done some reconnaissance. “That’s okay, babe. How about his license plates?”

“The numbers were removed, but Jason is tracing the make and model. So far, the vehicle hasn’t left the city. Hold on, the police want to talk to me... call you right back. Love you.”

“Love you too, sugar.”

Hanging up with her, I slip on a headset. “You there, new guy?”

“Copy that and the name’s Patch. The entire crew has your six, bro. Every available person is offering to help.” There’s no

one better at manning the desk than Hands and I wish like hell he was here.

“Thanks.” Despite the situation, knowing my Patten family is with me gives me hope. “Listen, can you send me the URL of Sam’s uploaded video. I want to watch what happened myself.”

After the link arrives in my messages, I click and press play. In the grainy image, an armed man in a ski mask keeps his head lowered as he slinks toward the daycare room. A few minutes later, he carries my wildcat son under his arm. A sense of pride fills my chest even as anger surges. Mikey is doing everything possible to slow the bastard down.

“Shit. Don’t look now, but we’re being followed.” Glancing in the rear-view mirror, Slate interrupts my thoughts.

As I twist in my seat, I memorize the plates of the black sedan closing in on us. When a familiar face pokes out a back window and frantically waves us toward the curb, I glance across the cup holder and curse.

“The FBI wants us to pull over, but don’t you do it, brother.”

“Good copy.” My Patten boss speeds up, and as the dark car falls back, a shot ricochets off our hatch window.

“What the fuck. Mind telling me why they’re firing at us?” To avoid getting killed, Slate swerves into the left lane and narrowly misses an Elder-Care van.

“Hell if I know.” One hand braced against the dash, I point out the next exit. “Take it.”

“Shit.” My buddy whips the wheel to the right and the SUV fishtails.

After bouncing off the guardrail, we spin out of control, and by the time we stop, we’re facing oncoming traffic. Slate turns our car around, but we’ve lost precious time and the Feds are almost upon us.

Patch, who’s been silent up to now, sounds in my earpiece. “I’m connecting you to Detective O’Brien. Stand by.”

“Sutcliff? What’s going on?” A friend, a member of NYPD’s Joint Task force, and married to Jason’s creator, I trust Colin’s intel almost more than anyone.

“Griner. Clean or dirty?” While I wait for his answer, we’re bashed from behind, and our vehicle lurches forward.

“Under internal investigation, why?” His honest response is all the permission I need.

My window down, I lean over, and blow out Griner’s front tire. His vehicle hits the curb and balances precariously on two wheels. After it tips over, Slate screeches to a halt, shifts into reverse, and races backwards to the upside-down car.

Grabbing his weapon, he runs forward. On my side, a door flies open. With an armed man threatening my friend, I release two rounds into the assailant’s body armor. The would-be shooter moans and crumples to the ground,

“Don’t fire.” The other occupant crawls out on hands and knees.

As Slate squats and zip ties his wrists together, Griner whines, “You got no idea how bad you screwed up.”

*Frankly, I don’t give a flying fuck.* Right now, my son needs me. I need to go before the police lock me up for hours. No time for niceties, I punch the Russian unconscious and drag him by his feet to the SUV. There, I pop the hatch and hogtie him with zip ties.

After I slam the door, Slate frowns. “Leave. The cops are on their way.”

“Not until I question FBI-guy. See you on the other side.” Gun to Griner’s head, I walk him between two buildings.

Because I don’t want Patten Securities involved in what some may consider an illegal move, I text Joey my address.

After he agrees to pick me up, I call Sam. “Any sign of Mikey?”

“Not yet. Where are you? We expected you an hour ago.” I blame the man beside me for worrying my wife which is yet another reason to take him down several pegs.

“Griner ran us off the road. He’s messing with the wrong man. This dickhead is either going to start talkin’ or start bleedin’.”

There’s a long silence while she digests the new data. “Copy that, tough guy. Do whatever you need to save our son, and I’ll reach out to my contacts to see what else shakes loose.”

A quick goodbye later, I send Joey my coordinates, and walk my prisoner south, away from the cops.

Soon, Vinny’s black Towne Car arrives, Sam’s cousin helps me toss the FBI agent in the trunk, and I jump in the passenger seat. “Did you secure someplace close by where we can question him?”

Joey raises his brows and smirks. “Is the pope Catholic?”

Not in the mood to joke around, I call my wife again, but they found no leads, not yet. About fifteen minutes later, her cousin pulls into a garage in Brooklyn’s Williamsburg district. Done being polite, I pull the Fed out of the trunk, slam his ass on the floor, and point the barrel of my Glock at his foot.

“My kid means the world to me, and you don’t mean shit. So, if I was you, I’d start talkin’ or plan on limpin’ the rest of your life. Let’s start with the basics. Why did you shoot at me?”

“Actually, I don’t need to tell you shit, douchebag.” Griner’s tone pisses me off. Not only that, he’s wasting my time.

“This little piggy goes to market.” I shoot the tassel off his right shoe and a urine stain appears near his fly.

“Wait. You kid’s disappearance has something to do with the Russian mob. That’s all I know. Honest.” A slight tic near his eye tells me he’s lying like a fucking rug.

“This little piggy stayed home.” A slug cuts the leather next to his toe and I point the barrel a tad to the left. “Want to go for the roast beef?”

Shaking, the man curls up in a ball. “No. Listen. Some arms dealers stole drones destined for the Ukraine and stored them at Vitale’s warehouse.”

“Why take *my* kid?”

“They think you were onto them.”

“And Howie?”

“He’s a thief. What the fuck do you think he did?”

“Shit.” I knew we should’ve let sleeping trees lie. “Joey? Grab this moron. All of us are going on a little trip to where this all began.”

## Chapter 17

Sam

Sitting in St. Thomas' school cafeteria, I set aside my laptop and ring Suds' phone, which he picks up in two.

"Any word?" His voice sounds so hopeful, I wish I had better news.

"Not yet, but everyone is working on it. Where are you?" My nose starts to run, so I wipe it using a soggy tissue, and tamp down my tears. *I need you here with me. What could be more important?*

"I'm running one more errand, and then I'll join you." His hardened tone tells me he's on a dangerous mission but lying to try and shield me.

Recent calls to Patten Securities have yielded nothing except for a new guy who says I should speak to my husband.

"Sebastian. He's my son, too. Tell me what you're up to."

"Sugar, if I'm arrested, our babies will need one parent to take care of them. Catch up to you soon, I love you sweetheart." After the loose cannon hangs up, I call Joey for the hundredth time, but am again forwarded to his voicemail-full message.

"Shit, shit, shit." My mind races, my thoughts clear, and I ring Rose. "Do you know where Joey's at?"

"No, but he left in a rush. Said something about running an errand. Any word?"

"No, put Kimmy on." Waiting for the little girl, puzzle pieces start to fall in place.

"Hi Auntie Sammy. Did you find Mikey?" The thought of her and kids like her, traumatized for life, strengthens my resolve.

*What if the gunman started shooting?* “Hi sweetheart. Remember when your daddy dropped you off at the house today? Which car was he driving?”

“He was in the fancy black one. The one where I’m not allowed to touch anything, like the door handles... Was Mikey really kidnapped?”

“Yes, but we’re going to bring him home. Don’t worry, okay? Thank you honey, and you are a huge help. Put Auntie Rose back on.” While I say my goodbyes, Jason tracks down Vincent’s Lincoln.

It doesn’t take long to figure out the boys went back to the warehouse. I need to be on site, too, but our SUV is parked near home base. Scanning the school cafeteria, I spy my mom, and plead for her car keys. Soon, I’m standing in front of a chair containing a tied-up, bloodied, Special Agent Griner. The storage space around him shows holes in the dust where crates must’ve sat but recently been removed.

“Oh my God, Suds. What is going on?” Turning, I meet my husband’s steely, emotionless gaze.

“He and some other turd ran me and Slate off the road. He said he’s workin’ undercover, but he’s not on our side darlin’.” His words trigger some white-hot, pent-up anger. It shoots through my veins and bubbles over to the point where I see red.

Eyes narrowed, I squat on my heels. “Do you know who took my son?”

The beaten man pales, turns his head away, and swallows hard. “I keep telling them, I don’t know his name.”

“You lying sack of shit.” Standing, I shoot between his legs, and take aim at his cock. “Care to pee into a bag the rest of your life?”

Suds grabs my hand. “Now, hold on a New York minute.”

“Nope, I am going to castrate this motherfucking bastard.” To save my boy, I will do anything necessary, whether legal or illegal.

Seeing the intent on my face, my partner shakes his head and turns to the Fed. “Ever seen a furious mama bear protect her cub? Best of luck to you, dude.”

“Three, two...” Gun held between both hands, I don’t intend to miss.

As my finger slides toward the trigger, Griner’s eyes widen. “Wait. I’ll give you a name but I’m sure it’s an alias.”

Once I’ve holstered my weapon, I open the Jason app, and hold my phone under the traitorous agent’s mouth. “Say it.”

“Ivan Kozlov, aka ‘The Goat’.”

The AI program finds multiple faces to match the nickname, and after it sends the images to my cell, I scroll through them in front of the douchebag.

“Say *stop* as soon as you ID him.”

“That’s him, yeah that one.” He sounds truthful but I’m so exhausted, I look to Suds for confirmation.

At my husband’s nod, I jab my finger at the agent’s sternum. “Should I discover you’re lying, I’ll hand you over to my uncle and let him deal with you, once and for all, asshole.”

“You don’t need to worry. It’s him.” *God, he is so pathetic. No way he works undercover for the FBI.*

“What now?” My worried gaze turns to my partner, pacing and pursing his lips.

“We find our son.” His firm, military tone should comfort me, but it doesn’t.

*If it was only so easy...*

While I try to think of next steps, Suds dark eyes narrow and his lids lower. “You should jump back on with Jason. Tell it to search everywhere within two hundred miles. To escape out of the city, the kidnapper must’ve gone through a tunnel, over a bridge, or under an EZ pass. He couldn’t’ve gone far.”

As he barks out commands, I imagine explaining Griner to my dad, and point at the man’s bruised face. “Can you back up a bit? How did he end up here, tied up like this?”



Suds toes the man's ruined shoes. "I already told you. He shot at us and tried to run us off the road."

"Us? You mean Slate? Where is he?" My head swivels, but if the taciturn man is in the warehouse, he's keeping a low profile.

"Downtown, no doubt being questioned regarding this asshole's whereabouts." His sentences might be coherent, but I'm so confused my head throbs.

Like I do when working on our AI app, I try to narrow the scope of my questions. "Did Griner kidnap our son?"

Suds holds my hands. "Sorry, I plumb forgot to tell you. The FBI is investigatin' some military drones stolen from a shipment to the Ukraine."

*What the actual fuck? How did I lose the plot?* "Honey, I may regret this, but I hereby grant you a one-time-only-use-pass to ramble but make it fast."

His steely gaze meets mine. "As long as you promise not to shoot anyone else's cock off, I will explain fully."

"Yeah, yeah, sure, sure. Now spill." If I'm to help find Mikey, I need more intel.

Sebastian scratches the short growth on his chin, thinks for a minute, and his eyes brighten. "So, we bought a Christmas tree. Poor Howie's finger fell out of the branches. No doubt, it got chopped off for stealing something of value. After all, the man's a thief. Here's where things became interesting. The FBI is investigating missing US military-issued drones. I believe someone stored them in your Uncle Vinny's warehouse. The crooks must've been inside and when they seen us snooping around, panicked. They wouldn't've bothered us none except for me finding the damn slug. I think they knew the bullet would lead us to Vapes' gun, and it wouldn't be long before the Feds found the evidence they needed to connect the Russians to the stolen goods."

*Finally, things are beginning to make sense.* "So, you think the Russians killed Stanley Steamer to keep him from talking?"

“I do. And they likely took Howie out, too.”

“And because you found the slug, they took Mikey for leverage?” As my hormones surge, Suds takes me in his arms, his eyes wet, too.

“Sweetheart, getting all upset isn’t healthy for the baby.” Him reminding me I’m pregnant causes unwanted tears to wet my cheeks.

“Oh my God. We can’t have another. I’m a terrible mom.” As I sob into my husband’s chest, someone clears their throat in the doorway.

“Shit.” Suds pushes me aside, grabs his gun, and aims toward the sound.

“Whoa, whoa, whoa.” Hands in the air, Frankie backs up and Chloe, perched on his shoulders, hisses.

*Shit. What is he doing here?* While my partner lowers his weapon, I wipe my sleeve under my nose. God, he must think I’m a total crybaby.

“Leave Griner with me. I’ll keep him on ice until you’re ready.” As the hitman walks toward our prisoner, my husband raises his eyebrows at me.

Once I nod my approval, Suds swerves back toward the unexpected helper. “Appreciate the offer. I’d be obliged if you don’t kill him, though. We may have more questions.”

“Understood. Now go. Police are on the way.” As he drags the Fed to his car, we follow him past the empty lot, where all this started.

My husband, sensing I’m about to lose it again, slides a reassuring arm around my waist. “C’mon sugar, how about I take you home?”

“No, our office. We have work to do.” I’m not resting until our son is found.

## Chapter 18

### Suds

Sometime after midnight, I call my mother-in-law for help. It takes her, Rose, Mia, and Marion to pull the laptop away from Sam and insist she lie down. There's no advantage to be gained beyond what Jason, Patten Securities, and the FBI are already doing.

Praying harder than I ever recall, I make all sorts of bargains with the Lord. Friends and family stop by, bringing food and words of encouragement. Still, the minutes tick by. Without a ransom request or a word of my son's whereabouts, my hope fades.

The office phone rings around two, my heart thumps, and I wait for a nod from a man monitoring my phone before I pick up. "Hello?"

"We have a couple leads. Stay positive." Detective O'Brien's trying to help but I know they've got jack shit.

"Damn it, I can't sit here doing nothing. How can I help?"

"Give Griner back." The reason for his call now clear, I curse under my breath.

*Not knowing where he's at, I couldn't give him back, even if I wanted to, which I don't.* "I have no idea what you're talkin' about."

Hoping I haven't burnt any bridges, I pour another cup of coffee and review the school's blurry video tape a dozen more times.

The armed masked man, Ivan Kozlov, double parks his Jeep across the street and tailgates into the building on the heels of a teacher. The whole time, the back of his hoodie faces the camera.

The daycare room has no surveillance but in a recorded interview, Miss Darlene describes how the man peered down at his phone and told Mikey to come with him. When my son refused, the kidnapper picked him up by the waist, and left the room.

We roll a few more seconds of inside video where our son fights like hell in the hall. The outside surveillance, after some enhancements, remains too grainy to be of use.

*Shit.* What am I missing?

About an hour later, my cell rings and Mike Russo's voice sounds over the airwaves. "The Goat was found in Manhattan. Executed. Two slugs to the back of the head."

"And my boy?" My pulse races. *God, please don't let him be dead.*

"No sign of him." My father-in-law may be defeated, but I'm not giving up, not yet.

"You sure it's Kozlov?" *Maybe, they made a mistake. Sure, that's it.*

"Same make and model car, deep bite marks on his hand, and they found a ski mask in the back seat." At the captain's emotionless tone, I'm unable to find the wherewithal to say goodbye, and simply hang up.

We're totally screwed. The Russian was our only lead. My throat thick, I place my head down on the table, and weep.

I'm a former SEAL. I was supposed to protect my son. How are Sam and I going to survive beyond this? As if summoned by my thoughts, my wife slips next to me. Her brows raise in silent asking and I shake my head, no. I can't tell her about the kidnapper being dead. If she starts cryin', I'll lose it.

"It's okay, tough guy. My mom told me." She lifts my head up and cradles me in her arms.

Strengthened, with her at my side, I turn back to my laptop and play the abduction video repeatedly. At some point, she sticks an egg sandwich in my hand, and I gag down the

cardboard-flavored breakfast. If I'm to find my son, I need energy.

The sun's rising when she takes a call and taps my shoulder. "My dad says they're searching the kidnapper's car but found nothing which makes no sense. Ms. Darlene said they'd been decorating pinecones with glitter glue. Surely, the sparkles would be everywhere, right? And why shoot The Goat?"

"Tying up loose ends?" *God, my thoughts aren't coming together at all.*

Vitale, grabbing a coffee behind us, clears his throat. "The only reason you put a bullet in someone's brain is to send a message."

"Because he fucked up?" My wife swings around to face the mobster, who simply shrugs.

"Hypothetically speaking? Yeah, probably."

Pulling my partner to my lap, my mind whirrs as I create a narration for the uploaded video. "Here's The Goat entering the building. Afterward, he goes into the classroom, and here he is escorting Mikey out."

As I zoom in on the man's hands, Sam's eyes widen. "No bite marks."

My heart racing faster, I go through the images a frame at a time. "Hey, we never saw Mikey after the short hallway clip, you know? Notice the time difference. At first, I thought the clocks were out of sync, but now I wonder. It takes the Russian fifteen minutes to travel from the hall to his car."

Sam stands so fast, she topples her chair. "You think our boy may have escaped?"

"It's possible." I grab our coats, take her hand, and sprint with her to the door.

Vincent opens it for us, removes his wet, unlit cigar, and shouts down the stairs. "A Vitale never goes down without a fight."

“Oh my God, we need to search the school.” Hopping in her mother’s car, Samantha contacts Father O’Connell who wakes his housekeeper, who rings up the janitor who unlocks the door.

While we wait, O’Brien calls. He tells us kindly how we’re tilting at windmills and not to get our hopes up. Of course, he may be right, but we need to be doing something other than waiting for news of my son’s death.

## Chapter 19

Sam

Inside the school, we retrace the kidnapper's steps, starting at the daycare room. Pinecones, red yarn, and glitter glue, litter the miniature tables. Insect art covers the walls. Most of the children drew circles with lots of legs, but a few do have eyes.

In one corner, colorful posters show what to do if approached by a stranger, if a fire starts, or if a gunman enters the building.

These images cause a spark of insight, and with my heart pounding, I call Miss Darlene. "Did your class ever practice active shooter drills?"

A little sob distorts her mic. "Yes, I'm so sorry, but it happened so fast I-

No time to waste and not wanting to sound accusatory, I cut her off. "This is not your fault. Tell me what you directed the children to do."

The classroom helper sing-songs her answer. "Scurry away, little cockroach. Hide and remain very quiet. Don't come out until a policeman says it's safe."

*Holy shit. That's it!* "Thank you, this is super helpful."

Tugging on my husband's arm, I drag him under the exit sign. "Quickly, walk me through the video again."

Suds gestures to a table in the middle of the room. "Mikey sat here. Kozlov demanded he leave, and our boy refused, so the kidnapper grabbed him."

My fists clench. If The Goat wasn't deceased, I'd figure out a way to end him.

Lost in thought, we enter the long corridor, and my partner points to a lens above a bright window. "There's our only inside view."

As I picture my beautiful son fighting to break free, we reach a 'T' in the hall, and Suds squats. "The camera loses them here."

While he touches a drop of blood on the floor, I jiggle the handle on a door marked NO ENTRANCE. Frustrated it's locked, I tap my partner on the shoulder.

"When I was a student here, Mr. Grigio always mopped floors on Thursdays. If the new janitor does the same, Mikey may have escaped to the basement."

A few calls later, we descend the stairs.

"There." Shaking, I point out specs of glitter and Suds shoots me a tight smile.

"Don't get your hopes up. The sparkly shit flies everywhere." He squeezes my hand and at the bottom, switches on one naked bulb.

"Mikey?" His flashlight app illuminates the tops of hundreds of boxes and crates.

"Michael Sebastian Sutcliff. Are you down here? Come out, it's safe now." Even my well-practiced mom-voice is met with silence.

"Buddy, it's me, Daddy. The danger is gone, and you can come out, now." My husband catches my gaze, purses his lips, and shakes his head no.

*Shit. Think, Sam, Think. He's here, I know it.* "Jesus. There's about a billion places to hide down here. What if he's injured and can't respond?"

As I add *using the lord's name in vain* to the second page of my lengthy list of sins, Sebastian scratches his head, shoves heavy boxes aside, and shines his light on the empty spaces.

"This place looks real familiar."

"Remember *The Case of the Miraculous Weeping Baby Jesus*?" I point to the huge crate where the creche was stored.

"How could I forget?" Crouching under a beam, he tosses the cover off a trash bin, stares, and moves on.



Still hopeful, I recall how God was with us. “We sure could use another miracle, right about now. Right, tough guy?”

“Tell you what. How about we make our own? Roundup dogs, friends, and family. Let’s turn this place upside down.” He thumbs his phone and stops as I squeeze his arm.

When he looks up, I capture his gaze, and cup his rough cheeks. “I have an idea. Michael’s teacher said don’t come out until a cop says it’s okay.”

Punching in familiar digits, I place my father on speaker. “Hey, we think Mikey might be hiding in the basement. Can you tell him it’s safe to come out now?”

“Sure, if you think it will help.” After clearing his throat, he shouts out, “Mike, son? This is your papa. I’m a policeman and I say it is time to come out. The bad man is gone.”

“Wait.” At a tiny scraping noise in the back corner of the church, I hold my breath.

A wooden lid drops to the floor, and for a moment, I can’t believe my eyes. “Oh my God!”

Reality hits, and I race to a crate marked *nativity*. Bawling, I hold my son’s small body to my chest. “He’s o-okay.”

Suds joins us in a family hug. On the phone, my father shouts to my mother, and they start crying, too. With all eyes too watery to call nine-one-one, Suds speaks into his comm unit. At some point, help arrives, and we move outside. Unable to let go, I hold my brave boy while the paramedics check him for injuries. Other than a few bruises and being dehydrated, he appears to have come out unscathed.

When little Mike is settled in the emergency room, I heave a sigh of relief until FBI agents barge behind the curtain to question him. Before I can kick their asses to the curb, our boy tugs on Suds’ shirt.

“Can I wamble, daddy?”

“Sure buddy, go for it. Tell them what happened.” Winking at me, he smirks.

Mikey frowns and points his finger gun. “Stranger danger. The bad man says, you come with me.”

My little guy grins at me. “He doesn’t know the secret word, mamma, and I say no way, Jose.”

Pride wells up inside me. We raised a brave kid.

“So, I bit him.” The little guy makes a face, chomps his teeth, and sounds a lot like Elmer Fudd. “Now scuwvy away, little cockwoach. Hide and remain ver-wy quiet. Don’t come out until a policeman says it’s safe.”

“Mikey, you did real good, son.” Suds wipes his eyes, turns toward me, and kisses my forehead.

“You watch him closely, y’hear?” His steely gaze is one I recognize well.

“Where’re you going?” Cupping his cheek, I try to stop him, but his normally soft eyes have turned ice-cold.

“To find the bastards who dared touch my family.”

Taking a deep breath, I bob my head. “Do it.”

## Chapter 20

### Suds

Not remembering the last time I slept, I settle for bad vending machine coffee. Outside, I leave the scent of hospital antiseptics and breathe in the cold, fresh air. My feet slide on the icy sidewalk while I pace and attempt to unravel the tangled cobwebs. What do Stanley Steamer, a finger, Russians, and drones have in common? The elusive answer crystallizes as the caffeine kicks in. Everything revolves around Vincent's damn warehouse.

Needing an objective opinion, I call Detective O'Brien and suggest his wife, Dr. Jones, join our discussion. Colin was the only one who told me Griner was under investigation. He's also high up on JTTF's food chain, so I presume he's privy to more details.

After bragging about my son's remarkable escape, I move the conversation to why he was kidnapped in the first place. "What can you tell me about the missing drones?"

The cop clears his throat. "Already, I've said more than I should. Perhaps, if you could tell me where you stashed a certain missing FBI agent, we could share more intel?"

My fists clench at the mere mention of the dirty Fed. "Honestly, I have no idea where he's at and even if I did, I'm not feeling inclined to help the guy. The bastard tried to kill me."

"Are you sure it was him that shot at you?" A kung-fu master, he's able to keep his emotions under control. Even so, he heaves out a heavy sigh, and I understand his hesitation. Who wants to think one of their own has turned traitor?

"Talk to Slate, he was with me." *Shit*. The last time I spoke with my pal, he had a tie-wrapped Russian in the back of his SUV. Was he arrested? And if so, did he make bail?

My mind jumps ahead, while Colin's winds down. "Getting permission from the director may take some time. As

soon as we're cleared, I'll text you."

"Thanks, I owe you." Done with one call, I jump in the SUV and make another, happily surprise Slate picks up.

Dispensing with pleasantries, my friend, and sometimes boss, starts up mid-conversation. "Grayson Patten is meeting with the President and the Secretary of State as we speak. The man we stashed in the SUV spilled his guts. He claims the Russians are holding Griner's wife and child hostage."

"Oh boy, I know what that feels like." Okay, I may feel sorry for the little shit, but the FBI has protocols, and being a senior agent, he should've followed them. My mind spirals down a dark hole until Slate's next question brings me back.

"So, what did you do with him, Sebastian?" The tone sounds a mite angry, and I'm relieved I don't have to lie.

"Frankie has him." After rolling down my window to pay the parking fee, I aim my empty cup at a trash bin, and score two points.

"The hitman?" My buddy's voice squeaks up an octave and I hold back a snicker because I've never known him to be blindsided before.

"Fuck. Do you know how to get in touch with him?"

"Sam does. She cat-sits for him."

"Figures. See what you can do." When dead air signals the end of our call, I ping my wife at the hospital and bring her up to speed.

"Shouldn't we let my uncle Vinny clean up his own mess?" My spouse has been through hell, and I can't blame her for wanting it finished, but I need to do this my way.

"I hear you babe, but first we ought to ask Frankie to release Griner, if he's still alive."

Samantha laughs quietly and moves her mouth closer to the mic. "Not his style. Too many witnesses. So long as I insist politely and continue with our feline arrangements, he'll return him."

“Mrs. Sutcliff, hitman-whisperer. I must admit, it has a certain appeal.” As I chortle, the air goes dead.

A second later she returns. “The doctor’s calling. Can I put you on hold?”

“Sure.” As I wait, I glance down at the incoming text.

O’Brien: Come to my office. Now.

By the time I turn right on Bay Parkway, my happy wife informs me Mikey’s going to be released.

We chat for a moment more and as we’re about to hang up, she adds, “Don’t do anything I wouldn’t do.”

Based on her past behavior, this leaves almost everything on the table.

“Copy that, sugar.”

## Chapter 21

Sam

Suds crawls into bed long after midnight. Barely awake, I kiss his soft lips, spoon against him, and fall back asleep. In the morning, we're late for mass. Church over, surrounded by family, we stroll to Sunday brunch. With no privacy to discuss what was said at his meeting last night, I'm practically drooling to find out.

Now, in the dining room, my husband pouts because the sermon lasted less than five minutes. "The new priest has no imagination. He got to the point, then wham, blam, he's done."

After a tsk-tsk, I pat his head. "Not all men are born to ramble, honey."

"Mebbe I will offer to give him lessons?" The moment my spouse finishes his generous offer, everyone within listening distance shouts a resounding no.

"I'm only joshin'." He takes another bite of Italian pastry, grins, and turns to Mikey. "Nothing beats ramblin' though, right son?"

"Wight." The boy's high five is so fucking cute, my stupid hormones leak at the eyes.

After I find a tissue, Joey whispers in my ear. "Dad wants to talk to youz guyz, outside. Now."

Leaving our kid surrounded by aunts, uncles, and many cousins, we follow Uncle Vinny's oldest to a Lincoln Towne car, parked nearby. In the back seat, the old man pokes his head out the door, and waves us in. Once we've slid inside and closed off any prying eyes, Vincent hands me a piece of paper.

While I read, he pulls out his cigar and gestures with the glowing red tip. "The drones are in Jersey. Normally, this would be taken care of by me, but I hesitate to encroach on someone else's turf, capiche?"

Leaning over, I kiss the mobster's forehead. "No worries, Uncle Vinny, and thank you."

"Don't mention it. Go nail those dirty sons-of-bitches. Give them my kindest regards." Interview over, he glances up at the rear-view mirror.

Immediately, his driver jumps out, runs around the back of the car, and takes my hand to help me exit the vehicle.

Back in the house, I ask my parents to babysit Mikey. As Suds calls Detective O'Brien, me and my partner rendezvous in the living room. Sitting on the sofa, I plug my uncle's GPS coordinates into my map app.

After only a few minutes of research, I hold out my screen so my partner can read along. "The drones are on a container ship, scheduled to leave at noon."

"Yeah, Colin said the same. He's going to find a judge to issue a search warrant." My hubby rolls his eyes, and I catch his drift.

"Seriously? On a Sunday? Not very likely. Don't we want those Russians found and taken out?" My words may sound harsh for an FBI consultant, but sometimes a woman needs to take justice into her own hands, especially when her son becomes a target.

It doesn't take long for *Suds & Sam, Private Investigators*, to make a plan and soon, we're in our SUV, headed for New Jersey.

When we're about to reach the tunnel entrance, Sebastian directs Slate's incoming call to the SUV's Bluetooth speaker. "The Feds need time to obtain a warrant, so Grayson pulled some strings with the harbor master. He's agreed to slow the ship's departure. I'm on my way. See you there."

My husband speeds up but traffic is heavy. Over an hour later, we arrive at a diner where the team discusses their options. After we sit, I wave at Hands and Wheels. The secret mission they worked on either finished or got delayed. The fact Slate called them in, sends chills down my spine. He's expecting trouble and called in the A Team.

The commander opens his tablet and swipes across the screen. “These two seamen are Russians. The rest onboard are innocent crew members.”

“So, what’s the plan?” Okay, we arrived late and it’s rude to ask, but I’m dying to learn how they intend to keep the ship from leaving the damn harbor.

While I imagine the worst scenarios, Suds winks, sits, and places me on his lap. “We sneak on board, steal the drones, and give them back to the US government. We can do this with our eyes closed and one hand tied behind our back. We got this, sugar.”



## Chapter 22

### Suds

Around midnight, me and the three other frogmen slip into the murky ocean. We swim under two container ships and surface behind the back of *The Nimet*. With a length of four football fields to choose from, finding an unprotected stretch of guardrail creates no challenge.

Treading water, I aim my weapon and shoot a grappling hook over the side. When no one rushes toward the clink of metal, my team does likewise. We climb our ropes, and with one leg up, crawl over the railing.

Flat on my belly on the deck, I whisper into my chest mic. “All onboard. Piece of sweet potato pie.”

The overhead whine tells me Hands’ drones hover nearby, in position. “Take the ladder to your right.”

Trusting his eyes back at HQ, we ascend the mountain of stacked containers. At the top, new-guy pulls a stick welder from his backpack. The second he begins cutting, someone spots the flare and shouts below us in Arabic.

“Fuck, we’ve been spotted. Keep working. I’ll cover.” Kneeling, I raise my weapon, place my finger on the trigger, and wait for the inevitable hail of bullets.

Outside speakers squeal, and an authoritative male voice booms, echoing all over the ship. “Attention! You are surrounded with no way to leave the boat. Surrender, and you will not be harmed.”

My neck twists back and I grimace at the lack of progress. “Move it along, little doggie.”

The kid shrugs, arms steady as he works. “The torch cuts as fast as it cuts.”

When a bullet dings nearby steel, my eyes dart around, searching for a target. “Damn it. Where are they?”

Hands curses over the comm. “Ten tangos on shore, at your four o’clock.”

Turning, I take aim and drop a man stupid enough to think we wouldn’t fire back. After the gunplay pauses, I glance behind me again. Patch has finished cutting two sides of the rectangle, but at this rate we’ll all be dead before he breaks through.

At the sound of boots clunking on metal rungs, I swing toward the commotion. *Fuck*. “Where’re they at now?”

“One container over to port. About to be topside.” Thankful for my pal’s skill, I back up, run and leap across the gaping space.

Too soon, another foe pops up in my path. Still squatting, my heel kicks out, but I miss the whack-a-mole when he ducks.

A third tango emerges to his right. Hopping up, he catches me off balance and head-butts me in the gut. While I’m falling on my ass, his knife approaches my neck. Pissed at myself, I trap his wrist, and struggle for his weapon. We roll a mite close to the precipice. That fall would kill us both, but I ain’t dying today. I got me a new baby to greet.

“Suds, hold him up.” At the command in my ear, I flip onto my back, and a shot is fired.

The man I’m wrestling falls on my stomach and as he loosens his grip, Lucky chuckles. “Losing your skills, eh mate?”

Embarrassed by my sloppiness, I toss the knife out of reach, and knee my opponent in the groin. As he grabs his balls, I topple him over the railing.

Before he hits the water, Slate sounds in my headset. “There’s a dozen more about to board.”

“Well, I’m a mite busy here. How about y’all do somethin’ this time?” Eyes on my perimeter, I start to reload but stop

short as a weapon clicks behind me.

Swiveling, I face a huge, smirking Russian who raises his weapon. Before he can shoot, I bend, snag my boot knife, and hurl it at his face. Mouth agape, he clutches his neck, and the spark of life leaves his eyes.

“Sorry dude, you picked the wrong man to mess with.” After a prayer and a momentary pang of sympathy for his family back home, I retrieve my blade.

While I wipe the blood off it, Patch’s voice echoes from inside the container of interest. “Hooyah! I’m in... Holy shit. Are you getting this, Sam?”

“Good copy.” It was her idea to broadcast the stolen drones to the world.

With our mission almost completed, I jump back to join the excited kid. I’m guessing new guy found the motherload. Samantha, safely tucked on shore, squeals with delight. Because it’s so close to the sound she makes during sex my cock hardens making it hard to focus on what she says next.

“Oh my God. I’m forwarding the images to the FBI, the CIA, and Interpol. Hold on. Posting on IG, Twitter, Facebook, and the dark web.”

With her triumphant voice in my ear, I duck through the sharp-edged hole, enter the container, and whistle through my teeth. “Holy fuck, there must be thousands of stolen, hi-tech drones in here.”

“We’ve got what we came for. Go, go, go.” At Hands’ urging, we race out, climb down the ladder, and jump in the harbor.

The rest of our team follows and soon, we’re climbing out of the water near an unmarked van.

“Nicely done.” Slate rolls down the driver’s side window, twists his head, and peers up at arriving helicopters.

“Yessir. Whoever owns that container is in for a nasty surprise.” I reach my arms out to my wife, racing to my side.

Holding her tight, I kiss her with all my might. After we come up for air, my partner giggles as she checks her cell phone. “Over ten thousand hits and doubling every minute. Those Russians are going to be so pissed.”

“C’mon you two, time to go.” Gear stored, Slate motions us into the vehicle and on the way home, my NYPD friend texts me a message.

O’Brien: The FBI sends its thanks.

Me: No idea what you’re talkin’ about, buddy.

## Chapter 23

Sam

Back in our Brooklyn temporary quarters, I kiss my sleeping kid, give thanks to Rose for babysitting, and plop down on the lumpy sofa. “As a former FBI analyst and as a consultant, I officially think what happened is stupid.”

“What part?” Grabbing a cold beer for himself, Suds hands me a soda, and when he sits, his thumb rides high up my thigh.

My palm on his fly, I squirm and raise an eyebrow. “How could the Feds stop the container ship once we found the stolen goods, but not beforehand? What if we didn’t step up? The drones would be halfway across the Atlantic by now.”

“Wahl, thank the good Lawd, an anonymous caller alerted nine-one-one.” Smirking, he unlatches his jeans, frees his long length, and tilts his head.

*Oh, if he thinks he’s going to win tonight’s episode of Talk and Tease, he’s so wrong.* Head down, I lick his tip until he closes his eyes. When he moans, I straddle him, and glide over his thick cock.

With my liquids soaking my panties and my leggings, I continue the conversation. “It’s all over the internet. Apparently, some Russians tried to steal Ukrainian-bound drones. An unknown source broadcast their faces all over social media. Should they ever attempt to leave the US, oligarchs will make sure they’re killed or exiled to Siberia.”

“I heard a sexy ex-SEAL may be involved.” His course palms slide up my shirt, lift my bra, and once my breasts are free, he pinches my nipples.

*Holy fuckola.* “You don’t say.”

Game almost over, my head turns, I find his mouth, and we kiss. Out of breath, Suds lifts me off the couch. With my legs

latched around his waist, he walks me to the bedroom and locks the door.

While we toss off our clothes, a few remaining brain cells fire. “I was thinking. Why did those Russians freak out at the warehouse? Why shoot at us? If they left us alone, they’d be back home with all their booty.”

Naked, he climbs up my body, places his cock at my wet core and rests on his forearms. “The bullet I dug out must’ve killed Howie.”

“You know this, how?” Spreading my legs, I lace my hands behind his neck, and bring his lips to mine.

His tip at my entrance, he nibbles the sensitive part of my ear. “We found an errant slug and there’s a man missing. There’s not a whole lot of other conclusions to be drawn.”

“We’ll probably never know for sure. Poor Howie.” As I sigh, Suds slides deep inside me.

“Are we done talkin’ yet?”

My delighted pussy creams. “What?”

“About time.” Thrusting repeatedly, he nails my sweet spot, and I bite my lip to keep from waking the entire household.

Stars behind my eyelids, my feet lift off the mattress and as they latch at his back, he pistons my love tunnel. The old headboard bangs against the plaster as flesh slaps flesh. We accelerate, our need on maximum, and as he swells, my orgasm explodes.

While visions of sugar plums dance in my head, he turns me onto my hands and knees. His wet tip at my pulsing entrance, he plunges until he reaches an inner wall. Shuddering, I start to collapse but his arm clamps under my pelvis, and he drives me to a second high.

“Babe, oh, God, I can’t. Not again.” My nub under his fingertip swells and as he presses, I come.

“Fuuuck.” Ejaculating, a groan comes from deep within his chest, and he collapses on my back.

## Chapter 24

### Suds

After making love with my beautiful wife all night, I can't help but whistle. Although the case of the detached finger isn't completely solved, we did deter a bunch of Russians from taking weapons bound for the Ukraine and lived to talk about it.

Mikey grins as I spray his oatmeal pancake with whipped cream. Blueberries become Santa's eyes and strawberry jam, his hat. Martha Stewart, move aside, *Chef Suds* is in the house.

Right as I take a bite of my artwork, Sam's phone rings. "Lolly? No kidding. Thanks for the update."

My partner's arms wrap around me in a soul-wrenching, cock-cramming kiss. "Truly, a Christmas miracle has been announced. Salvatore found our part... Holy sheets and pillowcases, we can return to our own house."

"Don't tell me, it fell off a truck." Tipping up her chin and despite trying to remain on task, I can't keep from sharing her ecstatic grin from ear to ear.

"Yup, a tragic accident on the BQE in which a few plumbing supplies miraculously survived." My spouse's lash fluttering hasn't gotten any more convincing.

"Ain't you learned nothin' in the last couple weeks? Karma is one mean beech tree and will kick you in the behind." My head swivels to Mikey, busy chowing down.

Our boy doesn't appear to be interested in the conversation, but I can tell he's listening. Before I can chastise my woman for purchasing more stolen goods, the phone rings again, and she cups it to her ear.

"No kidding? Awesome. Yeah, that's perfect. Thank you so much!" Wiggling her sexy hips, her boobs bounce as she

dances around the room. “Now we don’t have to move to Canada, and we aren’t going to hell.”

“Who called? Saint Peter?” Figuring I’m in for a tall tale, I pour myself a cup of coffee. Dammit though, she is freaking cute when she puts on her happy-dance.

My wife hangs up, sits at her laptop, and starts typing like mad. “According to *The Sunday Times* and *The Village Voice*, Bensonhurst is the only place to be and be seen next weekend.”

“So, how did you pull a rabbit out of your hat?” Samantha never ceases to amaze me.

“Well, remember how I asked Jenna for help with Jason? The genius mentioned her husband’s Kung-Fu competition needed a venue, so I suggested we join it with our fund-raiser. Jenna modified our copy to assist with social media advertising, and the event is going crazy-viral now.”

“Oh my God, come see.” My partner turns her screen to show me a video of a barefoot, skinny, Kung-Fu Santa. Naturally, a twenty-five-foot-long Chinese dragon pulls his sleigh.

“Due to all the hype, people from as far away as Buffalo have volunteered. The events include a DJ, a dance-a-thon, roller skating, and bingo, of course. After receiving over a million hits on TikTok, the whole neighborhood agreed to double their outside decorations.”

“Did you discuss this with the power company?” The house next door comes to mind. The owners put out a giant-sized lighted snow globe, twelve reindeer on the roof, toy soldiers at the front door, and a running train complete with sound effects.

While I ponder the cataclysmic incident as seen from space, my spouse elaborates, “We’re closing off the street for food, art, and flea market booths. Of course, an appearance from Santa is scheduled, plus we have face painters, clowns, and a mime, which is a terrible thing to waste.”



“Ha-ha-ha. Congratulations, sweetheart. This is awesome.” As I hug her to my chest, I confess, “And I’m really glad we don’t have to leave the neighborhood. Never thought I’d say so, but it’s been growing on me.”

After a bit, I turn to my son. “You ready to go, kiddo?”

“Weady.” Two-thumbs-up, my boy hops out of his chair.

“Not scared?” As I study his face, Mikey purses his lips and ponders for a full second.

“Nope. Papa put the bad men in jail. All gone.” He brushes his hands as if removing dirt.

“That’s right, and no matter where you hide, I will always come pick you up, yeah?”

My boy pats my cheek. “Scuwwy away little bug. Daddy will find you.”

His funny antics make his parents laugh and after, Sam finds his coat. “Plus, never go with anyone who can’t say the secret word, right?”

“Wight, Mommy.” After we walk him to school, we pack our stuff into our SUV.

When finished, I walk down the hall, and pull on the trapdoor rope. “Want to say goodbye?”

Samantha shakes her head. “Wheels and Hands finished their missions, so Rose and Mia have already moved back home.”

On the bottom floor, I stop and stare at her male cousin’s closed door.

“Going to miss Joey’s crude remarks?” In a way, she’s spot on. He’s become more like an annoying kid brother than an employee.

“Weirdly enough, he’s started to grow on me.”

“Like a fungus?” My lovely spouse grins, grabs my hand, and races me to the SUV.

Soon, we're home, sweet-smelling home. We shut the windows, turn on the heat, and inhale the pine scent of our finger-free tree. Fully decorated, it's covered in bulbs and colorful LEDS, the setup a gift from my in-laws.

"Hmm. I still think we should've bought a real one." Done unpacking groceries, my lover plops down on the couch beside me, and stares at the twinkling lights.

"We have exactly fifty-eight minutes to spare, until we need to pick up Mikey." When I scoot closer to my wife, I kiss her with all the love I have, but as we're about to move to the bedroom, the outside motion detector goes off.

My voice plays through the loudspeaker. "Y'all best skedaddle, before I come out there."

My partner's eyes widen. "Did you rig this up again recently?"

"A man's gotta do what a man's gotta do. Now, c'mere afore we run out of time, babe."

## Chapter 25

Sam

Standing at the school cafeteria door, I barely recognize the playground, full of booths and carnival rides. Behind me, volunteers pour juice, milk, and coffee while people sit. Soon, their plates will be filled with stacks of pancakes and sausages.

So far, everything, including the spring-like weather, is perfect. So why did I break out in hives?

“Sugar, calm down.” Suds places a long string of raffle tickets in my hands. “Now, tell me. How does this work?”

Demonstrating, I share the ancient tribal wisdom. “Fold each one and tear it apart. You keep the piece with the number, then write your name and phone on the other half. After you’re done, go around and drop your tabs in the plastic tubs of the items you want to win.”

“And what does this have to do with Asian Americans?” Brows furrowed, he hands some tickets to Mikey who wants to play, too.

“Nothing whatsoever. Originally, the raffles were called penny auctions. However, because day laborers often received such a meager salary, the populace wrongfully equated Chinese with cheap, leading to the misnomer, Chinese Auction. The stubs were also much like the laundry vouchers of the day.” I point out a poster board where we explain the history of the prejudicial label and ask people to avoid its use.

“Well done. Now, where are them buckets?” My husband moves aside a lock of hair, tucks it behind my earlobe, and as he kisses my cheek, electricity runs down my spine.

Standing on my tip-toes, I nibble his ear, blow into it, and whisper, “As soon as this thing is over, we are finding a bedroom.”

Panties now damp, I take his hand and stroll my family through aisles of donated fruit baskets, Italian pastries, toys, and other stuff piled halfway to the ceiling. Passing a crowd of Marion's salon ladies, we wave. Busy arguing about the authenticity of a red, white, and blue ironing board, they don't see us.

With them behind us, I find a stuffed bear, and lay claim to my intended prize. Suds puts all his chances on a naughty nightie.

When I open my mouth to strongly object, he places a finger over my lips. "What? We're both bidding on a teddy, aren't we?"

I groan. "You do realize nuns hand out the prizes? Should you be successful, you will be picking up your prize at the school, not me."

Picturing the scene, my face heats. "According to my ninety-year-old teacher, Sister Eunice, sex is for procreation and not to be enjoyed."

"I'm guessing you failed the class." Suds snickers and I punch his shoulder.

"I was thirteen." My face brightens even more as people turn their heads at his hearty laugh.

Our tickets spent, we leave the area and stroll to the gymnasium bleachers to attend the Kung Fu competition. On the floor beside my knees, a sober-faced Mikey shoots out an impressive side-kick, and I make a mental note to enroll him in classes.

After the contests end, bells ring, cymbals clang, and drums bang. The crowd cheers as a Chinese dragon bounds into the gym. Judging from their acrobatic abilities, the performers must have high sashes in the dojo. The mythical creature's head bobs, his snake-like body dances, and giant jaws move to the beat. Delighted children shout as the beast prances, puppy-like, across the room and somehow, avoids Santa. After a few minutes, the serpent agrees to be harnessed to the sleigh. With one final sashay around the room, the doors

swing open, and we follow our Pied Piper to the sidewalk where Suds lifts Mikey to his shoulders.

Spying Rose and Wheels, I grab my husband's hand, only to be waylaid by Monsignor O'Connell. "It's a miracle. It reminds me of a story about Mary and Joseph—"

"Thanks, Father, talk later. Uh... my mom's car got a flat tire. Sorry but we need to go." I tug my rambler addict away before he can get involved in a conversation which would no doubt last well into the night.

Adding the white lie to my list of sins to confess, I recognize a familiar face in the crowd, and snap his picture. "Oh my God. It's him."

"Who?" Instantly alert, Sebastian does his bodyguard thing while I gesture toward the now blank spot.

"Howie. The douchebag's not dead." Disregarding my partner's *whoa -nelly*, I rush forward. "Excuse me, sorry, pardon me."

Eyes on the dark hat with the Alaska flaps, I squeeze through the masses, and chase my prey to the carnival. Dammit. He's not in the lines for the Tilt-a-Whirl, the Scrambler, or the Ferris wheel.

"Are you sure he's our guy?" About a minute later, Suds arrives at my side, sans Mikey.

"Abso-fucking-lutely." My phone out, I scroll to his image, and shove it in my partner's face.

Nodding, he frowns, his dark eyes dart all about, then narrow. "I got him, you stay put."

"No way, Howie's mine." Following my bossy alpha, I stop at the ring toss game where Howie glares at my husband, now holding him in place by the shoulders.

"Cops? Feds?" He holds up his bandaged hand as far as his sling allows.

"We found your finger in our pine tree." I'd almost be sympathetic, except for my hundred-fifty bucks.

“So? Not like I can glue it back on.” The thief’s sarcasm changes my mind. He’s a jerk.

Thinking of our trip upstate, I remember how upset the young woman was over the missing Virginia pines. “Sir, you stole endangered trees.”

“I can’t give dem back either. What’s your pernt?” His chin juts out, just begging to be punched but seeing how there’s children everywhere, I simply hold out my palm.

“I want my money back.”

“Fine.” The injured crook struggles to one-handedly remove his wallet. Once it’s out, my partner snatches it away, and removes all the cash except for one twenty.

“Father O’Connell thanks you for your kindness and generosity.” Coat open, Suds stuffs the wadded bills near his holstered weapon.

“Is that it?” Eyes wary, the little worm clenches his one working fist, but thinks it over and steps back from the scowling, ex-SEAL.

“Nope. Samantha and I wish you a Merry Christmas. If you want a happy New Year, I suggest you leave town. Were I to spot you in our neighborhood again, I’d lose my holiday spirit, real quick.”

After the cockroach scampers away, I reach for my husband’s neck and tug him to my lips. “How nice of you to let Howie go.”

My man waggles his brows. “You really think so? Wanna find out who’s naughty or... sexy?”

Turning a full three-hundred-sixty degrees, a small squeak exits my mouth. “Where? We’re in the middle of a kid’s carnival.”

Sebs grabs my hand, pulls me toward the cotton candy booth, and moves a trash bin to close off a narrow space. With a hard wall at my back, he captures me between his elbows, and kisses my brains out.

Shuddering, we come up for air, and I try to regain my labored breath. “Anyone could walk in on us. This is crazy.”

He opens his full-length wool coat, tucks it behind me, and unzips his fly. “C’mere, babe. No one can view much of anything.”

Reaching into my pocket, I find my hat and tug it lower on my face. Should someone come by, they’d glimpse a couple in a heated embrace, at best.

When our tongues tangle, his coarse hands unsnap my jeans to untuck my shirt. Suds slides his fingers up my body to cup my breasts. After pinching my tits until they point, he pulls my slacks to my knees and strokes my slick nub, long and slow.

“You’re always so ready.” While he rubs and plays, I wrap my digits over his steely length.

“Is the cat calling the kettle black?” Despite my efforts, my thighs refuse to spread further because of the tight fabric.

My husband snickers. “The pot, not the cat.”

“Whatever.” I kick off a sneaker, free one foot from the pantleg, and curl my calf around his waist.

Groaning, my hubby moves faster on my clit, which is already so turned on, I’m about to come.

As he cups my bottom, he tugs the wool tighter, and thrusts so deep, I shout. Luckily, he’s prepared and swallows my orgasmic scream.

With me still pulsing and sheathing his thickness, he groans and accelerates. My fingers at his neck, I push my face into his chest, and shiver. On the next thrust, he swells, I slide my hands lower, and as I dig in my nails, he sends us both to marital bliss.

I have no idea how long it takes to come down.

“Holy shit.” Unable to move, still hidden, I let him reach between my legs with a soft handkerchief.

When he steps back, his coat creates a curtain so I'm free to dress. Once I'm done, my smug husband tucks in his cock, and leads me back to the ongoing fair.

“Damn, girl. Do you make me crazy, or what?”

Still a little dazed, my head shakes back and forth. “I can't believe I agreed to sex behind a Catholic School's fundraiser booth. No question about it, I'm going to hell.”

“The sinners have much more fun.” Sebastian's grin makes me want to return for round two.

Instead, I squeeze his hand, and kiss his swollen lips. “Mmm... Billy Joel concluded, *only the good die young.*”

My navy man's laugh comes from deep within his chest and he doesn't bother to lower his voice. “Wahl, if that's the case, I figure I'll be fuckin' you until we're old and gray.”



## Chapter 26

### Suds

Opening the front door for my mother-in-law, I glance at my phone, and call out. “Sugar, you ready to go? Your mom’s here.”

My wife exits the bathroom and takes my damn breath away, since she’s wearing heels tonight. My sweetheart’s flimsy red dress has a sexy slit, exposing her thigh, making me think of a dozen ways to push it aside for some urgent party-closet-sex.

After I help her into her jacket, I slip on my long wool coat, and wink.

Her face as rosy as her lipstick, she turns to Donna and gives her a cheek-kiss goodnight. “Mikey’s asleep, and don’t wait up, Mom. The party could last until three, or even four.”

My hand on Sam’s lower back, I escort her to the waiting Uber. As we sit, the opening in her dress rides high, and my eager johnson swells.

“Let’s ditch this shindig and find a hotel, babe.”

My sugar lifts her lips to my ears, blows warm air, and bites the sensitive edge. “Our friends are expecting us, and we RSVP’d. Can’t you keep your *cazzo d’oro* zipped up for a few hours?”

“Wahl, if you wouldn’t wear such easy, fuck-ready dresses, my golden cock would wait.” Not wanting to mess up her face paint, I squeeze her thigh and let my thumb wander up to caress her panties.

By the time we arrive at Talon Bar, her pebbled tits point through the light fabric of her dress. Before I can find a spot to have our quickie, the Patten wives pull her to their table and the men drag me out on the terrace.

The redheaded owner, dressed in holiday black, takes my order as I gaze up at the bulbs strung everywhere. “Beautiful Christmas decorations, Emily darlin’.”

“Sorry, they’re non-denominational holiday balls.” At her wink, the guys within earshot start laughing.

“What about the tree?” I gesture at the flashing lights and ornaments in the corner.

A giant Australian and one of my best friends answers, pouring his accent on extra thick. “That, mate, is what’cha call a winter festivity bush.”

“Good to know.” Waiting for my local craft beer to arrive, I unconsciously check the branches for missing digits.

Convinced we’re in a dead-finger-free zone, I glance to the bar where the ladies cheer, and hug my woman.

“Oi, congrats on another little ’roo, Sebastian.” Returning with my drink, Lucky clasps my arm, grins, and clinks bottles with me.

“Thanks, but I’m surprised she decided to fess up. It’s still early.”

“Sheilas expect a bit of fair dinkum truth from their friends, and even if Sam didn’t admit it, they understand on instinct alone.” That settled, my Aussie friend and I yack about the war like a couple of old geezers.

After ordering my second brewski, I scoot a chair between Slate and Hands.

My cousin-in-law holds up his bottle and salutes. “The rumor is Sam found Howie and you sent the sleazebag packing.”

“In truth, I was doing him a favor, because the Russians won’t miss next time. Fucking bastards. Foreign nationals need to stay off US soil.” My brothers and I didn’t risk our necks, so enemy combatants can run amok over here.

“Have you guys moved back home?” No doubt sensing my tension, the Patten boss changes the subject.

Once I nod my appreciation, I flash a grin to all at the table. “God damned Christmas miracle. Hallelujah, our plumbing is fixed.”

“And how is little Mike?” As Slate raises his brows, the rest within earshot quiet.

We’re all family here and their genuine concern warms my heart. “As far as I can tell, he’s fine. He may need therapy sometime down the road, but the kid is resilient and brave as hell.”

At the mention of our mission, I realize I never thanked our commander for getting arrested for me. “That day on the FDR, when you had a trussed-up Russian in the trunk. How the fuck did you finagle your release?”

“Let me answer that one.” O’Brien, who I didn’t see standing behind me, pulls up a chair and flashes his deep blue eyes. “Our task force got wind of it and arranged your boss’s release.”

Hating to think the Russian got off, I’m compelled to inquire. “What about the asshole in the back?”

The JTTF detective shrugs. “The FBI has him in custody. The perp might be used for a prisoner exchange down the road.”

“And Griner?” Having walked a mile in the Fed’s shoes, I have mixed feelings about what should happen to him and I’m glad it’s not my job to dole out justice.

Scowling, Colin lifts the brown bottle to his lips and swallows. “He no longer works for us, is facing charges, and out on bail. Still, he’s lucky to be alive. Speaking of Lucky, here he comes now...”

A few beers later, unable to find my wife, I excuse myself, and ask the bartender if he’s seen her. According to him, the ladies moved to the basement over an hour ago.

Downstairs, I walk past another bar and into a living-room-like area with a fireplace and deep, soft, comfortable couches. It doesn’t take long for my willie to find the red dress with the damn slit high up her thigh.

After a quick, polite hello to the gals, I whisper into Samantha's ear. "How about a quickie?"

Face red, she takes my hand, and soon, we're going at it. When we're done, I depart first and of course, the first person I bump into is Dr. Blake.

"Hey doc."

Jack Taylor's wife waves and steps closer. "Suds, so how's it going?"

What she means to say is, *how are the nightmares?*

With my willy satisfied, and in the spirit of the season, I cut her a break and tell the gospel truth. "My dreams are less frequent, and I promise to schedule a few more appointments in the New Year."

The way I figure, with another baby on the way, I should work harder to keep these monsters at bay. While we say goodbye, Samantha, looking well-satisfied too, smooths her dress, and shoots me a smirk.

Taking my arm, she walks me toward Rose and Wheels, who found a quiet corner to smooch. Those two haven't seen each other for a long time, and I can relate. They must have a lot of sex to catch up on. Same with Saint Mia, who I can't pinpoint right at this moment, but knowing my pal Hands, he's sharing the gender-neutral bathroom with her right about now.

While Sam's cousins get it on with their spouses, a guitar sounds in the other room. Sienna Quinn, our circle's famous country singer must be starting her set. Her husband, the only guy in a suit, brushes away crumbs, and sits on the leather sofa beside us.

Swirling the amber liquid in his glass, Andy tilts his head, and nods thoughtfully at me. "Ursula told me your ramblin' was cut short. Damn, I should've thought of that years ago."

"Sucks for you, but I suppose, with another rugrat on the way, my ramblin' days are over."

"Hah, I'll believe it when I see it." As my go-to lawyer chuckles, I point to his wife, on stage.

“What about you two? Any storks in your future?”

Staring at his lovely Sienna under the spotlight, his eyes soften. “Well, I can hint an announcement may be coming soon.”

“Let me be the first to almost congratulate you.” After a handshake, I listen for a while with my danger magnet on my lap.

During a break, new-guy flirts with the singer and Andy goes ape-shit. “Who the fuck is that?”

After a shrill whistle through my teeth and a motion with my thumb, the man nods, raises his drink, and walks away.

I share a quick glance with my wife then raise my brows at the man who never loses his cool. “Goes by Patch. Recently hired. Nerves of steel. Haven’t had a chance to talk to him much but I’m sure he doesn’t know she’s married.”

Jack, one of the first Patten men, sits on the attorney’s other side. “This place sure has memories.”

With Don Juan on the other side of the room, Andy relaxes back to his old self, and grins at the bodyguard. “Do you know, when we first met, he was working for my brother, CJ Quinn?”

“The football player?” My eyes bug out. I never heard this story.

“Yes. My baby bro is a coach now. After a series of head injuries, he quit and married his physical therapist. They made a couple of kids and live in North Carolina, not far from me.”

When the vocalist starts her next set, the whole party squeezes into the downstairs where we drink and sing until closing.

About to leave, I add my tip to the jar, and thank the owner. “Best damn nondenominational holiday party ever.”

## Chapter 27

Sam

“Hurry. Wake up, Mommy. Santa came.” As Mikey knocks multiple times on our bedroom door, I groan. After a month of morning sickness, murder, Russian thugs and Chinese dragons, I’m ready to put an end to this joyous season.

“Wait a second, honey.” Glancing at my phone, I nudge my sound-asleep hubby. “Hey tough guy, Merry Christmas.”

“What time is it?” My spouse turns, opens his eyes, and after we kiss, I show him my screen.

“Michael Sutcliff, it’s only four AM, buddy. Go back to bed.”

“C’mon, Daddy.” Our son shouts are joined by Catrina in a similar chorus of yowls.

“Alright, I’m coming.” Santa-baby is gloriously naked, and my penny-auction teddy is likewise, inappropriate for children.

After we both dress in comfortable sweats, I open the door, hug my precious boy, and once again thank God, we found him unharmed.

While I make coffee and feed the cat, Mikey sits on his dad’s lap. Together, they discover all the small presents I stuffed into a long red stocking. Yawning, I sip on decaf, put a mug of high-test beside Sebastian, and sit next to my men on the soft arm of the comfy chair.

“Mommy, which ones are mine?” Eyes like saucers, my son stares at the packages under the tree.

“Look for any with your name on them in blue letters”. We made giant labels so Mike could find them himself.

Funny how it takes hours to wrap the presents and only minutes to undo all the work. The one he likes best is the toy

from his Uncle Joey. My First Auto Shop comes with over one billion tiny parts and if you lose one, the engine won't start.

Perfect. Now I'm considering giving Kimmy a drum set for her birthday.

As our little gear monkey disassembles his motor, Suds hands me my gift. "Here you go, sweetheart."

My curiosity piqued, I shake the box and something small clunks at the bottom. "What is it?"

"Wahl, you should open it." My SEAL's mysterious grin means it can't be perfume or earrings.

Much like my son, I rip into the package, lift the cover, and my jaw drops. "A knife? Isn't that bad luck?"

"Not if you add a penny, which I double-checked with Nonna. Keep digging, there's more." My partner hovers over me like a little kid as I dig into the tissue paper.

"My favorite boots?" While I raise my brows, Suds explains the custom stitching and added leather.

"Should you ever lose your pistol, I want my danger magnet prepared." He shows how the knife fits in the sheath. "The guys have agreed to give you lessons, too."

My eyes tear as I hug him. "Best gift ever. Thank you."

After we kiss, I hand him his present. "This one is yours."

Finding him a gift is almost impossible, but I'm pretty sure I nailed it. At first, Seb's brows shoot together, and his frown seems confused.

Then, his eyes widen as he reads the instructions and pulls out the father-son Saint Christopher medal necklaces. "They have built-in GPS?"

"Uh-huh. And a tracking app. I will never lose him, or you, again." My arms slip around him and hug so tight, it hurts.

When we let go, both sets of eyes are damp. Things could've gone so differently but they didn't. Should someone ever try to take our kid again, we will be ready.

Done with Christmas' first act, we eat breakfast. Still too early for morning mass, we watch the brand-new dinosaur show. Surprise, surprise, neither Mom nor Dad can download the old one.

Being four, Mikey believes us.

Hours later, we sit at the front of the church. Father O'Connell's sermon starts out like most. People should focus more on God's love and less on material things. At this point, he touches on 'love thy neighbor', which leads him to marriage vows, chastity, and he takes a detour to when he was only a boy, growing up in Hell's Kitchen and didn't have any daily bread but found forgiveness. Holy shit, I have no idea where else he went, because I fell sound asleep.

Suds' clapping wakes me up.

Horrified, I trap his hands and kiss them. "Honey, stop. Catholics don't applaud."

"Well, you should. Monsignor is a true master." The unapologetic grin tells me he did it on purpose.

"Add it to the pope's suggestion box next time we're in the Vatican." Standing, we sing Gloria in Excelsis.

The rest of the mass passes in a blur, and after a final Noel, we walk back to my parent's house for more presents and more breakfast. Despite my warnings, my parents have spoiled my kid with so much stuff, I'll need to rent a storage unit.

After we all arrive at the Russo's, it's time for turkey. Four generations grab plates and sit on stairs, chairs, or cross-legged on the floor.

Having confessed my pregnancy at the Patten party, I clink my spoon on my empty wine glass. "Excuse me. *Attenzione per favore.*"

Everyone quiets down, while I take my husband's hand and suck in a deep breath. "Suds and I are officially expecting baby number two."

As due dates are debated, and gender bets are made, I slump on the couch. "Thank God, it's over."



“Not quite.” Moving a magazine, my hubby displays the bulge under his fly. “Isn’t it time to deck the halls with balls of holly?”

“Boughs, and for the record, I don’t believe trees have nuts.” Grinning at Sebastian, I shake my head, so he nibbles my ear, sending chills down my back.

“Actually, they do. Not only that, it takes a male and a female bush to make holly berries.”

Turning, I kiss his gingerbread flavored lips. “Are you talking about the actress who played Catwoman?”

His eyes crinkle at the corners. “No, she’s hah-lee. I mean like in the *Holly and the Ivy*.”

“Yuck, I hate that carol.” My hands reach behind his neck, and I ruffle his untrimmed hair.

“Why?”

“To rhyme with running of the deer, the chorus would need to say sweet singing in the queer, not choir. Makes no sense at all.” My brows raise, waiting for his comeback.

“Huh. I always preferred, *Ding Dong, Merrily on High*.” Sebastian emphasizes the second word and I snort out a laugh.

“Oh, you don’t say? Well, I’m most fond of *O come All Ye Faithful*.”

Chuckling, he stands and reaches for my hand. “You win. Let’s say our fond farewells and head on home. Mikey must be exhausted, and I’m also ready for bed.”

“Aren’t you always?” My eyelashes flutter... well almost.

After I’m pulled to my feet, he whispers in my ear, “No, sometimes I’m ready for the couch, the dining room table, or behind a certain cotton candy booth.”

Face red, I take his hand, and bid goodnight to everyone. With Mikey asleep in his arms, we stroll the few blocks to our house.

With Christmas lights bright, I tuck my glove into the crook of his elbow, and squeeze. “I love you so much, sweetheart.”

My husband’s head turns, and as his heated gaze meets mine, he smiles. “And I love you forever, babe.”

I pray my danger magnet days are over. If not, I have a new boot knife, a pistol in my purse, and a bodyguard for a husband.

What could possibly go wrong?

The End

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Slate

By Stella Marie Alden

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# Chapter 1

Slate

I bolt upright at the warble of my house alarm, adrenaline coursing through my veins. Even before my feet hit the floor, I grab my gun off the bedstand and slide off the safety. A familiar stab from my shoulder reminds me to take it easy. My stitches aren't yet healed.

The nearby cell phone reads two in the morning, and I use its light to rush into the bedroom next door. With the noise off, I switch on the wall of monitors.

Shit. Most of the estate's cameras are down because the goddam squirrels chewed through the wires. I never figured on needing them so soon but it's pretty clear someone opened my front gate.

Barefoot, I rush past four empty bedrooms, jog the length of the living room and two kitchen islands. From there, I open the Anderson doors, pad onto the deck, and peer down at the source of my interrupted sleep.

Thirty feet back, my guest house is lit up like a fucking Christmas tree. It's either some bold squatter or an incredibly stupid thief. Regardless, I plan to scare the shit out of them. Who the hell has the audacity to break into my fucking estate? It must be some out-of-towner. Most everyone around here knows better.

Ignoring the pain in my shoulder, I run down the deck steps and make my way across the cold, wet lawn. Worms squish under my toes, crickets stop chirping and inside, a woman sings lightly. I walk up to the bedroom window and look in.

*Ah, shit.*

A young woman undresses, sexy as hell. She's got dark brown shoulder-length hair and pert breasts. She's thin and her

calves are muscular, like a runner. My gaze runs up her legs to the curls of her bush and blood runs south.

Ah, fuck it all to hell. Now I'm a pervert? I give her time to dress in pajamas which consist of tiny shorts and a tank top while I consider my next moves. Not too many years ago, I had a buddy blown to bits by a conniving bitch, almost as beautiful as her.

I keep that in mind as I rush to the front door and push it open. In the small kitchen, I figure it's time to teach this little trespasser a lesson.

Pulling out my weapon, I shout, "Freeze!"

She slams the bedroom door, a lock clicks, and it takes me two strides to get past the kitchen table.

I bang on the white, painted oak. "Get out here, missy. You have some explaining to do."

Not only am I pissed some intruder's in my guesthouse, my shoulder hurts, and my cock's gone hard. My fucking appendage should know better.

Looking down, it dawns on me I left my room in my birthday suit. I never expected to find a female, a gorgeous one at that. Shit, there's nothing to do now but grab a throw-pillow and hold it in front of me.

Suddenly, being naked is the least of my problems. The door bursts open and she's got a weapon. I kick, the gun flies, and my pillow drops. Screaming hysterically, she steps close and pounds her fists on my chest. When one of her blows breaks open my stitches, I've fucking had enough.

I grab her wrists, pin them over her head, and press her against the wall. "For crying out loud, stop."

Her eyes scrunch shut and her heart thumps against my naked chest. Dammit, I didn't mean to frighten her that badly.

"Look at me." I step back about a foot as tears leak down her cheek, and she bites her lower lip.

"Fuck it all, I'm not going to hurt you. I just want to know what you're doing on my property at two in the morning. I

won't call the police, if that's what's upsetting you."

Her eyes pop open.

Ah hell, they're dark chocolate with a few flecks of gold, framed by naturally thick lashes and no gooey shit. The tears sticking to them make me feel like a complete ass, so I move both her wrists to one hand and wipe away the waterworks with the other.

Her mouth moves, lips thick and red. "P-please don't hurt me."

I snort and glance down at my shoulder where blood flows from my open wound. "The only one injured is me. If I let you go, you promise not to fight? We can talk?"

She shakes her head up and down, silky locks on her shoulders. However, her gaze traverses to the open windows, the door, and finally between us where my cock has taken a huge interest.

"Sorry." I let go of her, grab a sheet, and wrap it around my waist. "I sleep naked, and you caught me off guard... Sit. Please."

"W-what do you want with me?" She eases down onto the edge of her bed, her eyes honing in on the gun by her feet which I pick up and turn around.

It's a realistic-looking water pistol. "What the hell?"

"Mace."

I shake my head at the stupidity of such a weapon as she narrows her gaze. "So, you're the infamous Slate. I'm not impressed."

"And you are?"

She sniffles and swipes her arm under her wet nose. "Lilac Starbird. I was going to be your live-in dog walker. Edna Weissman gave me your access codes. How else could I have gotten through your ten-foot gates?"

Ah shit. She drops her 'R's like someone from Boston making Starbird sound like Stahbahd and I don't know how,

but I'm certain my mother's gone and done it again. For the last six months, she's been trying to hook me up with nice ladies from good families. This time, I got to hand it to her, she's upped her game.

"Who are you, really, lady?" I need her to confess and get the hell off my property.

"What's your problem? Call Edna. She'll tell you. I'm your dog walker. Well, I was going to be."

Damn. It's true I called Edna, but I told her to call me back when she found someone. I wanted to interview *him*. I certainly didn't tell her to give away my access codes. I gave her specific instructions. She could use them in case of emergency and the dog needed to be fed.

Whatever. There's still that damn Boston accent. I fucking know my mother set me up.

Lilac, if that's her name, stands and opens a drawer in the antique dresser. She grabs her unmentionables and tosses them into the suitcase, open on her bed.

The panties are pretty and lacy, too tiny to do much good. They're the kind made to entice a man. Of course, my cock takes notice.

"Do you mind?" She stops for a moment and glares at my bulging appendage with hands on her waist. "I'll be out of your hair in just a few seconds."

"You can't go. It's fucking two in the morning." When I grab her hand, pure electricity sparks between us and we both stare.

Her lush lips open, big eyes widen, and nostrils flair. Holy shit, I let go fast. This is not the time or the place for that much attraction.

Despite the body language, her dry tone implies she's in agreement. "There must be plenty of hotels. I'll find one."

"No. You're staying right here. We'll talk about this in the morning." In another lifetime, I would've kissed that look

right off her face but now I'm older and wiser. Burnt once, I'm not going there. I no longer play with fire.

As if she hears my thoughts, she gives my thick cock under the sheet a quick glance and pointedly returns her gaze to my face.

"Jesus. That's not my fault. Look at you." I give her pointy nipples under her tiny silk top a long, heated, once over.

Face now beet-red, she mumbles, "You're the one who broke in on me. Edna said you'd be gone."

"Yeah, well, not too many people know I'm laid up and I prefer it that way."

The sticky liquid dripping from my stitches makes me run into the bathroom and grab a towel. I'm bleeding all over the place.

"Fuck." A bit light-headed, I sit and press my hand hard to my shoulder.

"Let me see that." All business-like, she steps between my legs and of course, my cock does the happy dance.

*Focus, Slate.*

"What are you, a doctor?"

"Soon." She lifts my towel, pulls off my bandage, and grimaces.

"What the hell does that mean?"

"Do you want me to patch you up or bring you to the emergency room?"

I don't fancy a night in the hospital. Honestly, I could stitch myself up, if I had to, but curiosity is a dangerous thing. What better way to find out what she's up to?

## Chapter 2

Lilac

Good God. What in the world have I got myself into?

I stare at the man's muscled form, covered in nothing but tats, a sheet, and a bandage. According to the pet-care agency, this Mr. Slate wasn't supposed to be in residence. I specifically asked the woman who hired me, and she assured me he worked in Manhattan and rarely came home.

Why then, does he even own a dog? Selfish bastard. He probably has a Doberman or a German Shepherd as a guard and needs someone to feed the poor thing.

I thought I landed a cushy job for the summer, especially when she told me it came with a place to live. Until about ten minutes ago, I was thrilled. It just goes to show you, if something sounds too good to be true, it probably is.

Shit, shit, shit. The man with thighs on either side of mine is pure testosterone. He's got dark, bedroom eyes, black lashes and a short beard. It looks so soft, I have to force my palm from caressing it. His lips, turned down at the moment, look like they could curl my toes when pressed to mine. That is, if I was looking for sex, which I definitely am not.

Enough! Jeesh.

Luckily, the doctor within takes over as I peel off his bandages and hiss.

*Oh My God. What kind of guy is he?*

"You were shot?" Shivers run up and down my spine. "Are you a cop?"

*Please say yes. Please say yes.*

Of course, he's going to say yes. What else could he say? 'No, I got shot robbing a bank?'

“Bodyguard.” He shrugs it off as if he just said he’s an accountant.

Okay. It could be worse. I take out my new doctor’s bag from under the bed and assess the pulled stitches. “You got alcohol or something to clean this with?”

He grunts some kind of affirmation and I wonder why I can’t understand him so look down. His face is toward the window, otherwise his mouth would be right at my breasts. Realizing how intimate this seems, I step back, and my butt bumps the open dresser drawer. It slides in with a loud thunk and I jump.

“And where would I find this alleged alcohol?” Damn, talking with him is like pulling teeth.

He starts to get up, but I take his hand and use it to press the towel into his shoulder. “I’ll get it. Just tell me where to go.”

He smirks at my unfortunate choice of words. “In the main house. Go up the deck and down the long hallway. The bathroom is the fourth door on the right.”

Where my palm rests over his knuckles, my skin tingles and a part of me doesn’t want to pull away. His dark eyes widen, his nostrils flair, and his breath hitches.

That can’t be good.

“I’ll be right back.” Best to run, rather than walk but I come to an abrupt stop at the kitchen door when his dog barks wildly from the main house.

“What’s her name?”

“Who?” Dark eyes shoot me a confused look.

“Your dog? Its name?”

“How the hell would I know? I call it Dog.”

*What an asshole. Doesn’t even bother to name his pet.* I click my tongue and pause, needing just a bit more intel.

“Well does Dog bite?”



“I don’t think so. Didn’t bite me.” A cocky grin spreads over his face.

“That’s not funny, Mr. Slate.”

“Just Slate.”

*Oh great. We go by one name, do we? Like Prince? Fine.*

“Listen, *Slate*. I don’t fancy being bit by your dog. I believe we’ll both agree we’ve had enough blood for the evening.”

His face goes earnest on me, with a voice to match. “Hey, I’m not messing with you. This puppy shows up on my doorstep last night and I took him in. He was pretty banged up and it looked like someone took a shot at him. So, I stitched him up. I think you and he will get along fine as long as you drop the attitude. Dogs sense shit like that.”

*Maybe I should let him bleed out.*

“I’ll be right back,” I smile sweetly and slam the damn door behind me.

Attitude? He hasn’t begun to see attitude. I stomp across the paving-stone path, up the deck stairs, and open the double glass doors. Suddenly, an English Sheepdog places oversized paws on my chest and slobbers all over my face.

“Well, hi there, baby. How ya doin’? You’re such a good doggy.” Laughing, I squat and let the puppy give me a few more licks before trying to follow Slate’s directions.

The kitchen is bigger than the whole guest house with granite countertops, two islands, and enough counter space for a TV celebrity chef. I turn left at a long hall, pass at least six doors and find the bathroom. After searching multiple cabinets, I finally locate alcohol, clean bandages and a tube of antibiotic cream.

Before I go, I have a second thought and stop in what must be Slate’s bedroom. There’s a pair of boxers on the floor and I grab his jeans as well. I really do need this job and any kind of sexual attraction will just screw things up.

However, I'm not blind. I can't help but note there's just one pillow and not one girly decoration in the room. The fact he probably lives alone makes the girls between my legs cheer, but I am not amused.

“C'mon boy.”

I open the door and the puppy gets away from me. He bolts halfway across the yard, turns and barks. Then, he returns with a bound and presses his head to the back of my knees to urge me on faster.

I have to laugh, despite the completely screwed-up situation. After I make sure Mr. Sexy is not going to die from loss of blood, I'll pack my things and... I don't know. I guess I'll find some park and sleep in my car. It wouldn't be the first time.

By the time I get to the little cottage, the pup is sitting next to Slate. His tail thumps while Slate gives him plenty of love. In the light, I notice the puppy's bandaged too.

Like owner, like dog.

“Okay, let's have a look-see.” I pull away the pillowcase, our hands connect again, and my lady-lips do somersaults. This makes it more difficult to get serious and inspect the bullet wound.

“How long ago did this happen?” I pitch my voice professional and detached.

“A couple weeks.” He opens his legs so I can step between which is the right thing to do but way too intimate given the fact he is sexy as all hell and naked except for the sheet wrapped around his waist.

“Okay. I'll repair the stitches that broke open, but you should see your regular doctor in the morning.” If he can ignore the attraction, so can I. Besides, I feel bad I was the one who caused him to bleed.

He grunts something which could be agreement or dissent.

“This is going to sting.” When the denatured alcohol sinks in, he hisses and glares.

“Sorry.” While I work, he studies me so hard he either wants to become a doctor or is worried I’m incompetent.

I cut the thread and he nods with a look more suited to a professor than a patient.

“Not bad.” He leans onto his elbows to get a better look, this time at me.

Quickly I step out from between his legs, sweat rolling down my back. The suitcase on my bed reminds me I need to go.

“I, uh. Okay. Mr. Slate. I’m heading out.”

“Where to?” He looks at an old clock on the wall, then checks his wrist. “Now, it’s three in the morning.”

He stands as if that were that and, well, it’s not. “Listen, it’s obvious this job isn’t going to work out. Best if I just go, but thanks.”

*For nothing.*

“Knock on my door when you wake.” He turns on his heel, grabs my car keys off the kitchen table, and strides out of the house.

The puppy turns his head between outside and inside, apparently confused as to who to follow.

His bark sounds an awful lot like his new master as he runs out the door.

I think about running after my keys but something about Mr. Slate screams danger. I don’t think Edna would’ve sent me to a serial killer but still, who knows. They say it’s the quiet ones you need to worry about.

I chuckle to myself. Well, hell, he wasn’t all too quiet while he was banging on my door. Still, I wouldn’t want to cross him and he’s definitely not a guy to argue with in the middle of the night.

I push the suitcase to the floor and lay down on top of the comforter, tossing and turning, wishing he hadn’t stolen my

sheet. At one point in the night, I remember I didn't lock the door and almost get up.

Seriously? With his alarms?

Knowing he's watching makes me feel strangely safe.

Sleep does finally come but it's full of weird dreams and too soon I wake, just before dawn. I glance over at the main house where Mr. Sexy types, his skin lit blue by his computer monitor. Must be he couldn't sleep, either.

For the first time since 'The Incident' I turn over and drop into a deep, dreamless sleep. When I wake again, the sun is high, and I have a caffeine headache. Damn it. I grab a couple acetaminophen pills out of my purse and gag them down with a glass of warm water.

After, I find a kettle and some instant coffee, the most important part of the day. In minutes, heavenly java is steaming in my mug. I search the empty fridge and cupboards for cream or sweetener.

Whatever. Black it is.

Once caffeinated, I pick up my phone, push dial and let my breath out in a long stream.

Hopefully, Edna will find some other dog-walking jobs. I know none will have the house included but I'll deal. The worst part will be sleeping in my car, but it can't be helped. After this final class at Columbia, I'll be all caught up.

Outside, some cardinal warbles, looking for a mate. *Good luck with that.*

"Hello? Mrs. Weinstein?"

"Just a second. Is this Lila?"

I don't bother to correct her. It's Lilac, like the flower, but nobody ever gets it right. "Yes, Mrs. Weinstein, it's me."

"Did you get settled in all right last night?" In the background, her three beagles bay, almost drowning her out.

I shout into the phone, "Well, actually, that's why I'm calling. Mr. Slate was not aware I would be staying in the

guest house. He was actually quite annoyed.”

I leave out the part about the gun and mace.

“Oh dear. Just a sec.” It sounds as if she’s covering the mouthpiece of her phone but not successfully. “Mother? Are you there?”

An elderly woman responds like the teacher in the Charlie Brown specials. “*Wa Wahhhh.*”

Mrs. Weinstein seems to understand fully and continues to converse as if I wasn’t on the other end of the phone. “Didn’t you inform Mr. Slate we got him a walker? Okay... Yes... Okay.”

She speaks again and I guess she’s addressing me, now. “Don’t go anywhere, dearie. I’m coming right over. Bye now.”

My cell phone indicates she hung up and I shake my head. Where the hell can I go? Mr. Sexy-Abs took my keys. I suppose I could just demand them back but something about going over to his house and knocking on his door is too much this morning. I need a hell of a lot more coffee to deal.

Not only that, unlike last night, my thoughts are clear and I’m in no hurry to go. The hundred bucks in my wallet won’t take me too far, especially when you consider my credit cards are maxed.

## Chapter 3

Slate

Edna Weinstein's muffler announces her arrival long before she turns into my drive. That's why I'm waiting by my door as she parks in my paving-stone circle. When all five feet of her jump out of the car, I can't help but note how her powder blue hair matches her Mercedes. She must be eighty which would make her mother over a hundred. Together, they've cornered the market on dog walkers or so I learned since becoming a foster puppy-parent.

After brushing the wrinkles out of her Hawaiian pantsuit, she uses her hand for a sun visor and squints up the steps. "Alexander James Slate. What did you say to that poor girl?"

Pup whines, so I let him out and hold his collar. "That poor girl you sent opened up my stitches. She would've maced me, too, if I hadn't stopped her."

"You probably scared the living daylights out of her. Poor little lamb."

*Are you shitting me? Little lamb?*

I stay cool because she reminds me of my grandmother or maybe because she's a friend of my boss's wife. Perhaps, it's because I have the dog by the collar. Whatever the reason, I don't march down the steps, scoop her up, and set her back in her car.

My voice is tight as I reiterate my demands. "I was quite specific when I ordered a dog walker. I said I wanted a male."

The pup woofs, his legs quiver, and my palm pushes down on his butt. "Stay."

The woman steps between the two feng shui lions at the foot of my entrance. "Don't be ridiculous. What difference

does it make? You're gone most of the time and you've got that whole empty cottage with no one in it."

Suddenly, her eyes go wide, her hands shoot to her mouth, and in an exaggerated move, she covers her heart. "Is it because of your dear departed wife?"

Almost everyone knows there was nothing dear about my departed wife. Charlene slept around while I was deployed, killed my son, and most have the good sense not to speak of her.

"If I want a goddamned male employee, it's none of your business." My teeth grit down, my chest constricts, and my fists clench at my side.

"Woof." The pup jumps up and I settle him down with a pat to the head. "Good boy."

Mrs. Weinstein must be getting senile because she neither catches my tone nor the muscles pulsing in my neck.

"Don't be rude, young man. For your information, all my men are booked. This is your only option and if you want my services, you'll take what I give you. I'll have you know I have a waiting list that goes out almost a year. The only reason I gave you Lila was to do Isabella a favor. Go ahead and try to find someone, especially a man." Her chin waggles when she strains her neck to look up at me.

Damn it. Isabella is my boss's wife, and I don't want this to get back to her. I never wanted a dog, but the poor thing came to me wounded. What could I do? I wasn't going to put him in a shelter. And, no way will I return him to his owner, not until I find out who shot him. What kind of bastard hurts an innocent puppy?

Besides, the dog has grown on me. At least he'll have a good home while I sort this out. All this goes through my mind while I try to calm the puppy and the fuming octogenarian.

I heave out a sigh. "Fine. She can stay."

"Hmph. I'll cut you some slack, Alexander, because of what happened to your family, God rest their souls, but that doesn't give you a free pass with me, forever. Now, march

yourself over to the carriage house and apologize to that girl. I'll hold the dog."

"Me? Apologize to her? I'll have you know she broke open my stitches and held a weapon to my face."

"Oh, for heaven's sake." She rolls her eyes. "Everyone knows you're Grayson Patten's bodyguard and took a bullet for him. You can't tell me that itty-bitty slip of a girl was any danger."

*Hell yeah, she was a danger and still is.* My stupid cock hasn't been so interested since my failed marriage. I sure as hell am never doing that again. Worse, last night, when the beauty stood between my thighs, I felt something break free in my chest. It's far worse than lust and that can't happen, either. I like my life the way it is.

"I'll go speak with her."

*It's no doubt the only way I'll be rid of Mrs. Weinstein.*

"Good idea, Alexander. I'll wait here." Her smug smile makes me feel about twelve as I hand off the pup's collar and head to my guest house.

Pup whines and I know just how he feels. This sucks. I don't want a beautiful young woman around who smells so good, with mile-long legs.

It'll be hard but I can avoid her. She's walking my dog, not my housekeeper, and not my nanny. For fuck's sake, I'm Air Force, Special Ops. I'm a goddamned bodyguard for one of the richest men in the world. Surely, I can deal with one pretty little med student until I find a good home for Dog.

On second thought, I circle back for the pup. Perhaps, his cute charm will soften up the girl.

Shit, this may be pointless. When I circle the house, the brunette's got the trunk open, her suitcase in hand.

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